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I Became the Secretary of a Hero!

Volume 3

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I Became the Secretary of a Hero!, Volume 3

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I Became the Secretary of a Hero!

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Chapter 1: Safe and Sound

SONGBIRDS chirped a soothing melody.

Warm morning light shined down on Aki's closed eyelids, rousing her from sleep. Images of Elias suffering in the cage of light flashed through her tired mind, shocking her out of bed.

"...Elias!" she cried his name and darted her eyes around, ready for a fight, only to be greeted by a laughably peaceful morning that was the exact opposite of the life-threatening situation she last remembered.

A gentle breeze blew in through the cracked open window, swaying the cotton curtains. Sunlight filled the room, people could be heard greeting each other in the streets below, and waves crashed against the nearby shoreline.

Isn't this the inn we were staying at in Port City?

Aki was sitting on a simple twin bed with a log frame inside a cozy room with wood paneling. There was no mistaking it: this was the same room she had caught up on things with Nako and where she'd relaxed around the table with Elias and the Hero Party. Those peaceful moments together seemed like they had happened ages ago.

I made it back? How?

Aki held her hand to her head and scoured her memories. The last thing she remembered was diving into the light cage and embracing Elias as if their lives depended on it.

My forehead started to burn after that and I had to close my eyes against the blinding light. Then what happened?

Try as she might, there weren't any memories left for her to dredge up. She had no idea how she made it back to the inn.

...Was everything just a dream? Aki wondered, then immediately shook her head. *No, it definitely happened.*

When she tried to stand, she was made painfully aware of the extreme

fatigue making her limbs feel like lead and the dizziness slowing her thoughts—likely side effects of using ancient magic with Johann inside the Ancient Ruins. She eased back down on the side of the bed and took deep breaths.

Then she dropped her gaze to her attire to find she had been changed out of her usual beige skirt suit into a comfortable red dress with a pretty floral pattern. Gold thread embroidered the hem and elbow-length sleeves with roses. It looked like the kind of casual dresses she had seen this world's city girls wearing.

The leather corset had been tied loosely, which could only mean someone had helped her change out of her suit while she was unconscious. Her skirt suit had definitely seen better days than when she got soaked, muddied, and bloodied during her hike and fight inside the cave.

“...I should let the others know I’m awake...”

Aki bent over to put on the shoes conveniently left on the floor beside the bed. She looked up just as the door opened a crack and Mina peeked in.

“Aki?”

“Mina!” Aki’s face lit up.

Mina threw what she was carrying onto the other bed and ran over so fast she nearly tripped. “Aki! Thank the Goddess! You woke up!” She pulled Aki’s head to her chest and squeezed her so hard it hurt to breathe.

The warmth of her embrace let it sink in that Aki really had come back from the cavern in one piece, and relief filled her all at once.

Aki wrapped her arms around Mina’s back and returned the hug.

“I’m glad you’re safe too, Mina! We made it back. We really did...” Just putting it into words warmed her heart.

Mina stepped back and nodded repeatedly, tears glistening in her hazel eyes.

“Yes, yes, we did! We all made it back safe and sound. Elias, Leo, Johann, Louis, and Sutcliff are alive and well too...!” Mina smiled and patted Aki on the head like an older sister. “We’re safe thanks to you. Thank you for saving us.”

Tears filled Aki’s eyes and spilled onto her décolleté. “W-Was I finally useful to

everyone? Did I succeed in protecting Elias...?”

Since the day she arrived, Aki was distressed by her powerlessness. But now she had finally tapped into the Goddess’s power and assisted her party as the Hero’s Right-hand.

Mina reached out and hugged her again, then reassuringly rubbed the back of her head.

“Of course, silly. And it’s not like that was the first time. You’ve saved us in so many ways. People need to be saved from more than just monsters. You have supported me, Elias, Leo, and the others mentally as well.” Mina faced Aki and winked. “We love you so much, Aki! We couldn’t have made it this far without you!”

“Mina...”

Aki buried her face in Mina’s shoulder. Mina had given her the words she needed to hear most after the ordeal she had been through.

AFTER sufficiently basking in their reunion, Aki sat with Mina on the bed and heard all about what happened after she passed out.

According to Mina, Aki, Leo, and Johann had succeeded in sealing the Solar Goddess’s powers inside Elias, but the four of them lost consciousness as a result.

The resulting energy burst caused the Ancient Ruins to start collapsing, and Lunar Magic users Louis and Sutcliff worked together to cast a large-scale teleportation spell to evacuate the entire Hero Party to the inn. Mina laughed and flexed when she got to the part about a horde of monsters flooding the cave while they were in the middle of casting the spell and how she gracefully drove them away.

She told the story as if it had been a walk in the park, but Aki could only guess at how difficult it must have been to protect four unconscious people from monsters and falling debris.

Thank you, Mina...

They succeeded in bringing Elias back because they worked together, saving each other when they needed saving.

The four unconscious members then slept an entire day without waking after Mina and the others got them back to the inn.

It was now the dawn of a new day, but Elias, Leo, and Johann had expended so much energy, they were still sound asleep in their respective rooms.

I hope they're okay...

"They're on their way to a full recovery too," Mina reassured and rubbed Aki's shoulder when she saw the worry on her face. "If you feel up to moving around, why don't you go check on the guys? Someone might be up by now. I'm pretty sure they'd be the happiest if you're the first person they see when they wake up."

"You think so?" Aki didn't sound too sure. "I guess I'll go check on them now then."

As she stood to go, Aki suddenly realized Nako wasn't around. "Hey, Mina? My younger sister Nako should have been waiting for us here. Did you see her? Maybe she went to take care of Johann."

"...Nako?" Mina blinked as if she'd never heard the name before.

Maybe she hasn't run into Nako yet?

"When Elias and I challenged the Ancient Ruins Quest, we left Johann, Leo, and Nako at the inn. Johann and Leo came to help us with the Quest, so Nako should still be here," Aki explained.

"That's strange..." Mina rubbed her chin. "I don't remember running into anyone other than the innkeeper after we teleported here yesterday. No one else has entered any of the rooms either."

"Really?"

Did Nako go out? Did something happen while we were away? I should ask Leo and Johann if they know anything.

With her mind made up to question the others, Aki headed for the door. As she approached it, she heard someone running down the hallway at full speed

before a familiar face flew into the room.

“Aki! You’re up!”

It was Sutcliff, of all people, who had come running to see her, but she couldn’t even react before he fell to his knees and pressed his forehead against the wood floor in a groveling position.

“Aki! I’m seriously sorry! I know what I did can’t be undone with an apology, but sayin’ sorry’s the only thing I can think of! I can never make up for the way I hurt you and the Hero. I’m so sorry...” he apologized to the floor.

Aki crouched in front of him. She shook him by the shoulders, trying to get him to raise his face. “Sutcliff, it’s all right. I’m all right! Please don’t grovel.”

The mere memory of him stabbing her shoulder gave Aki chills even now, and the resulting devastation caused by activating the Solar Goddess’s power in Elias had put them all in grave danger. Even if Sutcliff was just following the Dark Lord’s orders, his actions were still unpardonable. Elias in particular had been dealt a crippling blow through the events of the past few days.

He had been the root cause of their suffering, but without Sutcliff there, Aki doubted they could have reached Elias with his mind taken over by the Solar Goddess or teleported out of the cavern in time. A piece of her was glad to have him on their side. He proved that the Shadow Tribe’s magic and physical capabilities far surpassed humans’.

When Aki told him that, Sutcliff raised his head and emotionally hugged her—or rather, clung to her waist.

“Uhh?” she squeaked, going stiff.

“Lady Aki...no, from today forward I swear to devote myself to you, so you are Boss Lady! Use and abuse me for the rest of my life!” he requested with zeal, ignoring her slack-jawed reaction.



“...Pardon?” It took a whole ten seconds before Aki registered what he said and the fact she was locked in his arms. She gave him a little push to put distance between them, but he wouldn’t release her. “It’s fine, really! I don’t need you to serve me! Please let go, Sutcliff!”

Mina had been shaking her head the whole time, but since she saw Aki wanted space, she grabbed Sutcliff by the shoulder and dragged him away from her.

“Hey! Don’t go touching Elias’s woman! Are all Shadow Tribe members as clingy and needy as you?! Sheesh a meesh.”

If the Dark Lord and Sutcliff were anything to go by, the Shadow Tribe was full of unpredictable, idiosyncratic people who came across as sinister at first but were actually good at heart, if not a little off-kilter. They seemed oblivious toward human boundaries.

Thanks to Mina and Sutcliff, Aki was surrounded by laughter and cheerful banter for the first time in a long time.

Before she knew it, she was laughing out loud watching Mina bonking Sutcliff on the head until he was on his knees begging for mercy.

“**OH** yeah, you said you haven’t seen Nako around, right?” Sutcliff brought up after their laughter subsided. He sat comfortably on the floor with his legs crossed. “I honed my senses and detected faint traces of Mister Lord Dark Lord’s magic in this room. So I’d guess that he brought Nako back to his castle for whatever reason.”

“The Dark Lord did?” Aki wasn’t expecting that. “Why?”

Worry creased Sutcliff’s brow. “Can’t say. But from what I know, he deliberately set Nako free so she could meet up with you. Something big must’ve gone down for him to come get her earlier than planned.”

Does that mean Nako was in so much danger the Dark Lord had to rescue her? Aki wondered. Or did she leave with him for another reason? A reason she couldn’t stay with us...

“Don’t ya worry too much!” Sutcliff caught the fleeting look of despair on Aki’s face and grinned to cheer her up. “I, your great and mighty servant, shall temporarily return to the castle once Heroboy and the gang wake up. I’ll check on Nako while I’m there.”

“Thank you, Sutcliff. I’m glad you’re on our side now,” Aki said with a relieved smile.

Sutcliff blinked three times before uncomfortably looking away. He sheepishly scratched the back of his head. “...Is it just me or are you good to the bone? You’re too forgivin’ and pure. You should hate me for what I did and yet here you are saying you’re glad to have me on your side. That’s just...”

Struggling to put his feelings into words, Sutcliff mumbled the last part.

“I think I figured out why Heroboy and Master Leo fell so hard for you, Boss Lady. I bet your inability to hate and your straightforward kindness is a refuge for them,” he said, smiling softly up at the ceiling. He put his hands on his knees and stood. “I like that part of ya too. I know I can’t undo the hurt I caused, but I’m here if you ever need me. Call on me when you need a hand. I’m your guy.”

He laughed bashfully and beckoned Aki closer. Curious, she leaned in close.

Sutcliff snapped his fingers and beads of light danced over his hand. The beads merged and transformed into an ancient book with a rouge leather spine. The same book he had shown off inside the Ancient Ruins.

The Book of Creation copy! Aki gasped.

Sutcliff dangled it from his fingers in front of her face.

“This is the book Lord Dark Lord ordered me to give Hero Elias. I told you this before, but the original copy is located deep within Sanctuary, and only a handful of High Priests can look at it. After all, this book contains the true history of this world, which Sanctuary has long kept secret.”

Sutcliff narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. “This book is bulging with facts that’ll doom Sanctuary if they ever get exposed... A lot went down during ancient times that ain’t pretty...”

Sutcliff’s doleful smile seemed to hint at first-hand knowledge of the Creation

Era. The Shadow Tribe was said to live much longer than humans.

Maybe he experienced the Creation Era for himself? Aki looked to Sutcliff with that unsaid question hanging between them. He dropped the *Book of Creation* onto her hands as if to avoid going there. Her hands sank with the weight.

Ugh, it's heavy! Aki's eyes bulged as she propped up the hefty old book.

Sutcliff waved it around like it was lighter than a feather, but Aki needed to hold it firmly with both hands or she would have dropped it.

Silver beautifully framed the four corners of the book and, to Aki's surprise, the cover was embellished with the same mark of the sun and moon that had appeared on Elias and her forehead.

I knew it. These crests are intricately connected to the Creation Era and this book explains why... And it also depicts the truth about the Hero and Dark Lord and their Right-hands like Nako was telling me.

Mina gave the *Book of Creation* an apprehensive look. "...Say, is it all right if I look at that book too?" she asked. She had remained a silent onlooker until then.

"Go for it. I can tell you'll be stickin' around to protect Boss Lady and the gang. So be my guest," Sutcliff permitted with uncanny casualness for a book full of nation-destroying secrets.

Aki tentatively turned over the cover and peered down at the first page with Mina at her side. Small cryptic letters were scrawled across the pages. The letters looked like emoji hieroglyphs. They resembled what Leo drew in his magic circles.

"...Looks like it was written in the ancient script," Mina groaned. "Same stuff that was written on the Ancient Ruin walls and that Leo and Johann use for their magic circles."

"I see... Guess you need to know the language to read it. Can you read ancient script, Mina?" Aki asked, pointing to the squiggly lines on the page.

"Just a smidge." Mina shrugged. "Learned enough to get by as a Thief. But I wouldn't be able to get through this brick of text in my lifetime. We need an

expert.” She smacked her hands together as soon as she said *expert*. “Speaking of experts, we’ve got just the man in our party! He’ll burn through this heifer in no time,” she exclaimed, pressing her fingers together.

Aki instantly thought of the man who had read the Ancient Ruin walls with ease. “You mean Louis, right? He seemed to really know his stuff. Maybe he has a knack for deciphering ancient script. Plus, with his knowledge of history, he might have an easier time with it.” She looked up at Sutcliff. “Hey, Sutcliff?”

“What’s up?”

“Is it all right if we have our party Minstrel translate the *Book of Creation*?” Aki asked, assuming it’d be okay since Louis was also a member of the Hero Party.

“Him?” Sutcliff rubbed his chin for a few moments before coming to a decision. “He goes by Louis Neal now, right? You can show him without a problem. While you’re at it, can you tell him if he’s gonna lend a hand, he’d better see it through until the end?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mina asked, sensing something more behind his words. Sutcliff shrugged, signaling he had nothing more to say on the matter.

Does Sutcliff know something about Louis that we don’t?

All Aki knew about him was that he was a Minstrel and a nobleman’s third son. Yet for that background he had succeeded in teleporting the Hero Party with just Sutcliff’s assistance, had intimate knowledge about the ancients, and seemed to be shrouded in mystery.

Is Louis really just a Minstrel? Or is there more to him? We might need to sit down and have a good talk about it before going too far on this journey together.

“Anyway, enough chitchat. Would you mind goin’ and checking up on Heroboy and Master Leo?” Sutcliff asked Aki. “Seeing your face is just the right kinda medicine for them.”

“Sure. In that case,” Aki held out the *Book of Creation* to Mina, “can you bring this to Louis? The sooner he looks at it the better.”

“Happy to do it.” Mina accepted the book with both hands and winked.

Aki waved goodbye to Mina and Sutcliff and hurried anxiously off to Elias’s room, her heart aflutter with anticipation for their long-awaited reunion now that she finally had her hero back.

Chapter 2: A Lackluster World

SPURRED on by her desire to see Elias again, Aki hurried straight down the hallway from her room to Elias's door. Mina said he was resting alone in the room at the end of the second-story hallway.

Is Elias really okay?

It was hard to picture him healthy and well when she last saw him struggling to regain control of his mind. She believed Mina, she just couldn't shake the anxiety welling up inside her and ran the last few feet to his room.

Arriving at the wood door, Aki swallowed the lump in her throat and calmed her panicky feelings with a few deep breaths.

He's in there...right? What should I say when I see him? I'm glad you're okay? How are you feeling?

No, I'm pretty sure I won't be able to say anything once I see he's all right. With that thought, Aki broke free of the doubts plaguing her and put her hand on the doorknob without hesitation. She quietly turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

"Elias...?" she whispered.

The first thing that caught her eye was the peach-colored curtains, which swayed gently in the wind blowing through the partially open window.

The plain room consisted of a single bed and the chair next to it. The constant breeze cooled the small space, and the wood floor was warmly illuminated by the sun filtering inside.

The warbling of tiny songbirds outside the window filled the otherwise silent room. Surrounded by the definition of peace itself, Aki's anxiety abated, and she tiptoed to his bed.

She glanced down at the head of the bed to find Elias peacefully asleep, caressed by the gentle breeze.

His chest rose and fell with undisturbed breathing under the simple cotton

comforter.

His usual white cloak and coat worn as a symbol of his Hero status had been removed, leaving him in just his baby-blue inner shirt. Though his complexion was on the paler side, his expression was at peace and betrayed his youth.

Relief washed over Aki upon seeing him in person. She stayed rooted to the spot, staring at his face.

She swiped at the tears misting her eyes and sat on the chair beside the bed. He was finally within reach again.

...He's sound asleep.

Smiling at how innocent he looked in his sleep, Aki reached out and ran her fingers through his bangs, lifting them off his forehead. His golden hair spilled through her fingers like silk.

"...Elias," she said in a hushed tone even though she knew he wasn't listening. She rose from the chair, leaned over him, and whispered in his ear, "Welcome home."

"Mngh..." He stirred in bed, his eyelids flickering open.

His eyes hadn't focused on her yet, but they were their original green rather than the lifeless golden hue they had taken on while under the Solar Goddess's influence.

"Aki...?" Elias called her name in a hoarse, fleeting voice.

The emotions she had kept at bay burst forward, and she threw her arms around his neck in bed.

"Elias, what a relief... I'm so glad you're okay!"

Everything she had wanted to say to him disappeared as she sobbed uncontrollably into his shoulder.

Elias's warmth, smell, and the soft hair tickling her cheeks were all things Aki had longed to regain, and being able to hug him again felt like a miracle. Especially after she thought she had lost him and the sound of his voice forever.

Elias reached up and rubbed soothing circles into her back as she clung to

him, her tears unending. “Aki...I’m sorry...I’m so sorry...! I...” he fumbled with his words as if he had a lot to say, but didn’t know how to voice it.

Aki pulled back slightly so she could look at his face and shook her head. “It’s all right, Elias... We’re all okay... You don’t have to apologize. You came back to us. That’s all we—all I—wanted!”

Roughly rubbing the tears from her eyes, she kneeled on the side of his bed and smiled at him. To her, just having Elias present was more than enough.

Elias muttered “Thank you” with a sad smile as he caught her cascading tears with his fingers.

He came back to me just the way he was before...!

AFTER crying her heart out until her eyes dried, Aki explained the events that brought them to where they were now. Elias in turn said that he had a vague recollection of everything that happened after the Solar Goddess’s powers took over and that he clearly remembered the horrible things he did.

His consciousness finally shut down for good after Aki used the Lunar Goddess’s power to seal the Solar Goddess’s power, and he had no memory of how they got from the ruins to the inn.

Aki let him know that Louis and Sutcliff teleported them back with magic and that Leo and Johann weren’t in critical condition.

Elias’s eyes widened when he heard they were all right and he muttered “Thank the Goddess” over and over as some of the tautness left his face. His shoulders shook like a boy trying to hold back his tears as he silently wept.

Watching on without being able to stop himself while the Goddess turned him on his friends caused him to suffer in ways only he could understand.

Aki gritted her teeth as she thought of the miserable experience he went through, holding him in her arms as he lamented his actions.

“THE Solar Goddess’s crest...?”

Overcome by relief, Elias stifled his sobs as he cried in front of Aki until he finally calmed down and took a moment to process what she told him.

Aki explained what Johann told her about the Solar Goddess's crest, and the contents of her explanation included details about both goddesses Elias knew nothing about. He felt like a miserable fool for blindly believing in the goddess and fighting to the death for her when he didn't even know the whole story. It was starting to sound like he was a puppet on a string playing to her tune without ever being the wiser.

Ignorance was what caused the Solar Goddess's power to run rampant with his emotions and put not only his friends, but the woman he wanted to protect above all else in horrible danger at his hands.

There was no undoing the past.

...The closer the person is to me, the more likely I am to hurt them... he concluded, thinking of Leo, Johann, Mina, Louis, and Aki.

They're all irreplaceable friends who view me as Elias the man, not Elias the Hero.

Elias could only act like his real self around those select few friends and he vowed in his heart to protect them no matter the cost. They created the one space he felt comfortable in his own skin.

He wanted to repay them for sticking with him despite the constant dangers that accompanied the Hero on his journey.

What good that did. I just ended up being the one who hurt them the worst...

He shuddered to think what would've happened if Aki, Leo, and Johann hadn't been there or if they had been unable to stop him.

I knew it. I'm not supposed to get close to anyone. Keeping people close will only drag them into the inescapable fate of the Hero. That's only made truer now that I know I'm incapable of controlling the Solar Goddess's power.

Elias drew the hard conclusion that the only way he could protect the ones he cared about was to keep them at a distance. *...I should've never desired more...* His heart was chilled by regret. *It's my fault for wanting friends I could joke*

around with. My fault for loving a woman as amazing and unobtainable as Aki.

I wasn't supposed to have any desires. I'm not allowed to have free will.

The Hero belonged to the world and the Goddess—he was supposed to act like the puppet he was, and live and die for what the Goddess created him to do.

...I knew that from day one. It's nothing new.

Since the day Elias was born as the Hero, he was taught not to want anything for himself; that his duty was to continue giving everything he had to the people.

He had lived that way for so long, he hadn't realized he'd developed so many selfish desires. Since when did he start thinking he wanted to obtain his wants rather than just give up on everything?

And I was punished for it.

The Goddess punished him for becoming self-aware by using his own hands to thoroughly harm the irreplaceable people he had developed an unhero-like attachment to.

How can I redeem myself?

What must I do to stop from hurting others?

What can I do?

"Elias? Are you feeling all right...?" Aki frowned at his sudden silence. She leaned forward to get a better look at his face from the chair, which she had moved to after he sat up.

Elias smiled feebly in response and exhaled quietly.

If being around others means hurting them, I'd rather be alone forever. Isolation means they won't be hurt...and neither will I.

Come to think of it, that's how I've lived all along.

Since when did he start to fear solitude?

Elias brought his clenched fist to his heart.

If only I didn't have a heart... Then I wouldn't feel lonely, want to have friends, love anyone, or feel anything at all. Then I could be the perfect puppet that stays loyal to their calling.

After all, I'm an enigma. There's no one else like me in the world.

Remembering how different he was crushed his fragile heart, and when it did, all the color seemed to suddenly seep out of the world around him. Everything he once saw in vivid detail seemed to instantly lose its luster.

Perhaps because he had thrown a wall up between himself and the rest of the world, everything around him dimmed to match his miserable state of mind.

I don't belong anywhere. I'm not of this world. There's no place for me in it.

Even the woman he loved looking at him with worried eyes did nothing to move his frozen heart. She seemed a world away.

This is how it should be... I was always meant to be disconnected. Now I won't be lonely. After all, I have always been alone.

"...Aki, can I...ask you a favor?" Elias muttered, his voice sounding like a drop in a bucket.

"What is it?" Aki asked, anxiously leaning closer to hear him.

Maybe she realized how funny he was acting.

Elias heaved a heavy sigh, irritated by his inability to hide his emotions from her.

"...Right now I'm...I'm afraid of myself..." His voice trembled.

He wasn't trembling because he was nervous over what he was about to tell Aki. His hands and voice trembled with anxiety just remembering how he lost control of himself and mercilessly drew his sword against his friends.

"...I'm convinced I will...hurt the people closest to me," Elias continued, urged on by Aki's silence. "The closer they are, the more danger I'll put them in..."

He never wanted to go through that again. Leaving was the only option to protect his friends.

Elias directed a fleeting smile at Aki. "So I've concluded I should travel alone.

It's the only way I can protect the people I care about."

"That's not true!" Aki shook her head violently, needing to deny him with words and actions. "Things blew up in a bad way this time because no one knew anything about the Goddess's power. It wasn't your fault, Elias! It won't happen again—"

"We have no proof it won't!" Elias shouted before she could finish. Aki's shoulders trembled. He clasped his hand over his mouth, shocked he raised his voice. "...Sorry, Aki. I'm not mad at you..."

It was his first time raising his voice in anger, which was a clear sign he couldn't keep his mask on in front of her.

Elias looked down at his hands to escape her needling gaze. "Nobody, myself included, can say it won't happen again. I might turn on you and the others again...and next time, I just might kill someone..."

Aki listened to him, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

"I'm...frightened to death of that," he shared, laying bare his heart and overflowing emotions. "Just thinking about that possibility is driving me crazy. I'd rather fight all alone than risk it...!" he exclaimed, silencing her unspoken objections.

Maybe she was about to offer him words of comfort. Or maybe she was going to deny what he had come to believe. Whatever she had to say, she shelved it and looked down at the comforter, her expression torn.

Elias took a breath and continued, "...I want to start by apologizing to everyone, even though I know that won't be enough to make up for what I did. After that, I plan to go to the Dark Lord's Castle alone."

"You what...?" Aki stared at Elias, her cheeks taut. He met her gaze, wanting to get a read on her feelings.

"...The Dark Lord claims he wants a truce. I can handle him alone. There's no reason to put everyone else in harm's way. And if it comes to needing you to... help me...I want you to come for me."

Aki neither accepted nor turned down his request. She merely listened with

her eyes pressed shut, as if she was shutting out what he was saying. It seemed less like she was hesitant to answer and more like his proposal was too outrageous to process.

Maybe she had sensed that Elias was trying to draw a line in the sand between him and everyone around him.

AKI could only look on, her heart breaking, as Elias maintained that fragile, fleeting smile. Every word he said saddened her. She wished she'd had more power to help him when he lost control, then he wouldn't be suffering so much from what he had done.

And Elias had finally opened up to me, too...

It had taken time, but she succeeded in gradually exposing his true smile. Then the events in the Ancient Ruins resulted in him shutting back down again.

Maybe he was trying to protect himself from being crushed under the anxiety and guilt by putting a wall up. He was so traumatized, he saw no other way out.

Elias seemed to see the anguish on her face because he reached out and took her hand. "...You, more than anyone else, I want to keep out of danger. If you are safer away from me, then I...want to stay apart."

"Are you..." she trailed off. The implication in his words stabbed at her heart. She didn't want to know the answer to her question. She hoped she was making the wrong assumption. Still, she felt the need to ask. "...Are you...breaking up with me?" she finished through clenched teeth, her voice tight.

Just putting the question into words was painful.

...Elias's face is blurry. I can't see him.

His eyes wavered when he saw her crying. He lowered his gaze and silently nodded. "...I guess...I am. Let's stop being in a romantic relationship. We aren't breaking up so much as going back to how things were before. Back to being the Hero and the Hero's Right-hand."

Going back to how things were in the beginning? That's the same as losing him for good. He's completely rejecting me.

"I don't want that, Elias! I..." Tears rolled down her cheeks as the words lodged in her throat. There was so much she wanted to say, it was becoming a jumble.

I don't want to make things harder on him, but I can't stop crying!

Elias watched her reaction with sad eyes and gave her hand a light squeeze.

"...Aki, I thought I would never be able to love anyone but fell head over heels in love with you. And you even told me you loved me back... It made me wonder if miracles like this can really happen to someone like me. You taught me what happiness is. Thanks to you, I was glad to be alive for the first time."

Weeping, Aki turned a silent ear to listen to Elias's faltering feelings.

Elias closed his eyes in self-reflection. "I was stupidly happy. You meant more to me than my title as Hero, than this very world..." A self-derisive smile flitted across his face. "But I know now that I shouldn't have fallen in love with you. That's probably why I incurred the Goddess's wrath."

He cupped Aki's tear-streaked cheek with his hand and wiped away the endless drops that marked her sorrow.

"...I love you, I really do. That's why I want you to be safe. Safe from the Goddesses, the Dark Lord, this world, and the *Hero*." Elias made sure to emphasize that last part and weakly shook his head to stop her from saying anything in return.

It was the gesture of a man who had already given up hope.

"So let's end things between us."

Elias's words fell like an anvil into the depths of her heart. He was breaking up with her and not giving her a chance to stop it.

Aki couldn't shake her head or argue the point with him, she only stared at him, stunned, the tears trailing down her cheeks.

I can't reach him anymore... He won't direct that soft smile reserved for his girlfriend toward me again. Even if I try to connect with him, his heart won't let me in...

"Elias...I..."

The saddest expression flicked across his face as he brushed the tears off her cheeks. Encouraged by his touch, she lifted her face. She saw the sorrow on his beautiful face up close.

By not knowing what to do, I'm going to end up isolating him again...

"...I love you, Aki. You mean the world to me."

Aki closed her eyes to his bittersweet, heartbreaking confession. His lips brushed against hers for less than a second, but it was enough to double her misery. Their lips parted, and Aki gripped his shirt and leaned her head against his chest in her last attempt at resistance.

She didn't even say anything, and he still shook his head. It was almost as if he was wordlessly repeating "So let's end things between us."

Aki stood up and bolted from the room without looking back at Elias as if that would help her escape her feelings. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to accept it.

She slammed the door shut behind her and stood in a stupor in the middle of the hallway, leaning her back against the door for support.

I-It's over... I lost him...

As soon as that reality dawned on her, she slid down to the floor, the shock causing her heart to feel as if it had been carved out and stepped on.

Her chest hurt, her heart bled, and she wept in a loud voice in the middle of the hallway.

Chapter 3: Moving On

*“**LORD** Dark Lord, this is the child. The sole survivor of the Hero’s massacred village...”*

Was this a fragment of a long-lost memory?

A familiar man presented an unconscious young boy in his arms to the green-haired Dark Lord.

“I believe this child is Lenard Gaines’s descendant...”

Dark Lord’s crimson eyes widened slightly at that revelation. *“I see. Then I will save him by sharing a fragment of my magic. Will that do?”*

The younger man gently patted the young boy’s head and nodded. The Dark Lord slowly approached.

Covered in horrible injuries, the boy gasped for air, his life petering out with each ragged breath. He didn’t have long left.

“Please help him. He will surely aid our cause in the future,” the man said with conviction.

“So he will,” the Dark Lord said with a sedate nod before touching the boy’s right shoulder with his magic-imbued hand.

LEO woke up gasping for air and shot up in bed. He was shocked by the sweat drenching his body and causing him to stick to the sheets. The comforter slid off the bed onto the floor. He slowly stretched over the side of the bed, picked up the comforter, and looked around.

What he saw was the familiar scenery of the idyllic Port City inn where they were staying before taking on the Ancient Ruins Quest. It was such a peaceful, normal morning, it felt jarring after everything that had transpired.

Realizing that the danger had passed, Leo relaxed and exhaled deeply.

He squeezed his bangs and bent over, trying to remember his dream.

What was that just now?

He figured it was a dream, but there was something about it that left his heart thudding in his chest, warning him it was more than what it seemed. The contents were beyond bizarre, but was it really just a meaningless scene his mind made up?

I've never met the Dark Lord... Am I just that tired?

In fact, he was so tired that his whole body felt heavier than lead, and even getting out of bed was a pain. His mind was in a dizzying fog, and although he was awake, he felt half-asleep.

This must be the price of using a Holy Relic. I've still got a lot to learn. Leo shrugged, even that motion making his back muscles ache.

Leo could only speculate on the situation because his memories ceased after he activated the ancient magic. As pathetic as it was, he figured he probably fainted after that. A minor price to pay for using a relic to bring Elias back.

When he looked down, his black robe was missing, leaving him in just the sleeveless tunic he wore underneath it. Whoever put him in bed must've removed his robe to help him sleep more comfortably.

Leo decided to get his fatigued body moving and slipped his feet into the lace-up boots placed neatly beside the bed.

Checking on everyone comes first.

After everything he and the rest of the party went through to save them, Leo was especially keen on making sure Aki and Elias had made it back in one piece.

Once he started thinking about them, his heart raced and he practically ran out of the room with just the clothes on his back. As soon as he entered the hallway he heard the woman he loved crying in anguish.

He jerked his neck toward the sobs to find Aki sitting on the ground, burying her face in her knees in front of a room at the end of the hall.

Aki...? Did someone die?

With his heart in his throat, Leo forgot all about his exhaustion and rushed to her side, nearly tripping over his feet on the way.

“Aki! What’s wrong?! Is someone hurt?!”

“Leo...?” She glanced up, her tear-swollen eyes rounding on him. She placed her palms on the floor and tried to push herself up to meet him. “Leo! Should you be moving yet?!”

Leo crouched beside her before she could stand. He quickly shook his head. “I’m fine! Why are you crying out here? Is this his room?” He sensed Elias’s presence in the room. “I’ll go talk to him—”

“Don’t!” Aki grabbed hold of Leo’s shirt when he reached for the door, and she pulled him back down with a burst of herculean strength.

Surprised by the sudden tug, Leo fell back on his behind. “Aki! What did you do that for?! You could’ve gotten us both hurt!” He angrily glanced at her and his eyes bulged when he saw her expression.

Trembling, she gripped his shirt with both hands and pressed her forehead against his chest, clinging to him.

“I’m sorry, Leo...! Please don’t bother Elias right now...” she pleaded, then began repeating “I’m sorry” until her voice was hoarse.

Leo frowned down at her back as she kept her face buried in his shirt. *Something happen between them?* He placed his hands on her quivering shoulders and lifted her face so he could see her better.

“Oi, Aki, what’s wrong? Did something happen between you and...” Leo stopped just short of finishing his question.

Aki’s jawline had tightened, her face crumpling. Seeing the tears rolling down her cheeks onto her lap was the only answer he needed to know he was right.

I don’t get what’s going on, but she doesn’t want me to see Elias right now. Hmm... Leo scratched the back of his head, trying to figure out what happened without asking. *My guess is that Aki went to see Elias first and then something bad enough happened for her to burst out of his room and breakdown crying.*

He didn’t have the full picture but figured since she was just sitting there crying rather than running around in a panic trying to find help, Elias didn’t need immediate medical attention. In which case, Leo didn’t need to disregard

her desperate plea to stop him from checking in on Elias.

Drawing that conclusion, he decided to prioritize the hurting woman in front of him. He patted her head.

“I’m confused, but I at least know what you don’t want me to do.”

His word choice was on the vague side, but it seemed enough to reassure Aki that he wasn’t going to barge in on Elias. She looked up at him with red eyes and muttered “Thank you.”

Leo quietly sighed and gingerly grabbed her wrist. He hesitated for a moment as he felt how slender and delicate her wrist was before he pulled her to her feet.

He led Aki away from the room before she could object.

“Come over here for a bit, Aki. I want a proper explanation for what’s wrong,” he said over his shoulder.

Ignoring the perplexed look on her face, he marched on at a brisk pace toward his room. He thought she would have an easier time explaining what happened in the privacy of an empty room.

Aki gave a small nod and tottered behind him without a word.

I don’t know what happened between you two, but don’t go makin’ Aki cry, Elias.

“**WHY** don’t you sit there first?” Leo invited Aki into his room and directed her to the table and chairs in the middle.

Aki bumbled inside and perched lightly on the edge of the closest chair. Leo decided it was better not to sit directly across from her and chose to flop back on the side of his bed. He thought she would have an easier time talking about what happened with Elias if they were sitting farther apart.

Leo reclined back on his elbows, crossed his feet on the back of the nearest chair, and casually brought up the topic while he stared at the ceiling. “...So? What happened? Did Elias say something mean to you?”

It wasn't hard to guess that Elias, in his depression, would have lashed out at Aki because she came to see him first. Elias clearly loved her. So Leo could see how he might've hurt her in a moment of venting since she was someone he didn't have to filter himself around.

She looked at Leo with wavering eyes before her expression darkened and she lowered her head. He waited patiently for her to talk on her terms, but several silent minutes passed with her motionlessly staring at her balled fists on her lap.

Leo scratched the back of his head as he looked at her dejected side profile out of the corner of his eye. *She probably won't talk until she can gather her thoughts.*

He let out a long sigh, smacked his knees, and swung his feet back onto the ground. "You can tell me when you're ready... Why don't we have something to drink first? I'll go ask for drinks downstairs."

The entire second floor was reserved for guest rooms, while the first floor served as the lobby and simple dining area.

He hoped chatting over a sweet drink would lift her spirits.

"You don't have to go through the trouble for me," she mumbled.

"I'm doin' it for me. I wanna drink something sweet to restore my magic," Leo said, making an excuse he knew she would accept, and then he left the room alone.

He quietly closed the door behind him and glanced at Elias's room. Absolute silence suggested there was no one inside.

You heard her crying, didn't you? Leo thought with a sigh as he stared at Elias's sealed door. There was no way he hadn't heard her wailing just outside his room.

Did he stay cooped up in bed pretending not to hear her despite knowing he was the cause of her tears? Had he bit his lip and clenched his fists to resist the urge to go out and console her? Was he just trying to wait out her tears thinking that would make it all go away?

Whatever the reason Elias had for his actions, Leo couldn't forgive any man—even his best friend—for making the woman he loved cry. Actually, it was even worse because his best friend was responsible for hurting her.

What do you think I backed down for? I was trying to give up on Aki because I wanted you both to be happy together. But if this is how it's gonna be, then I ain't letting you have her, Elias, Leo announced in his heart as he headed downstairs, imagining his friend with his head buried in a pillow.

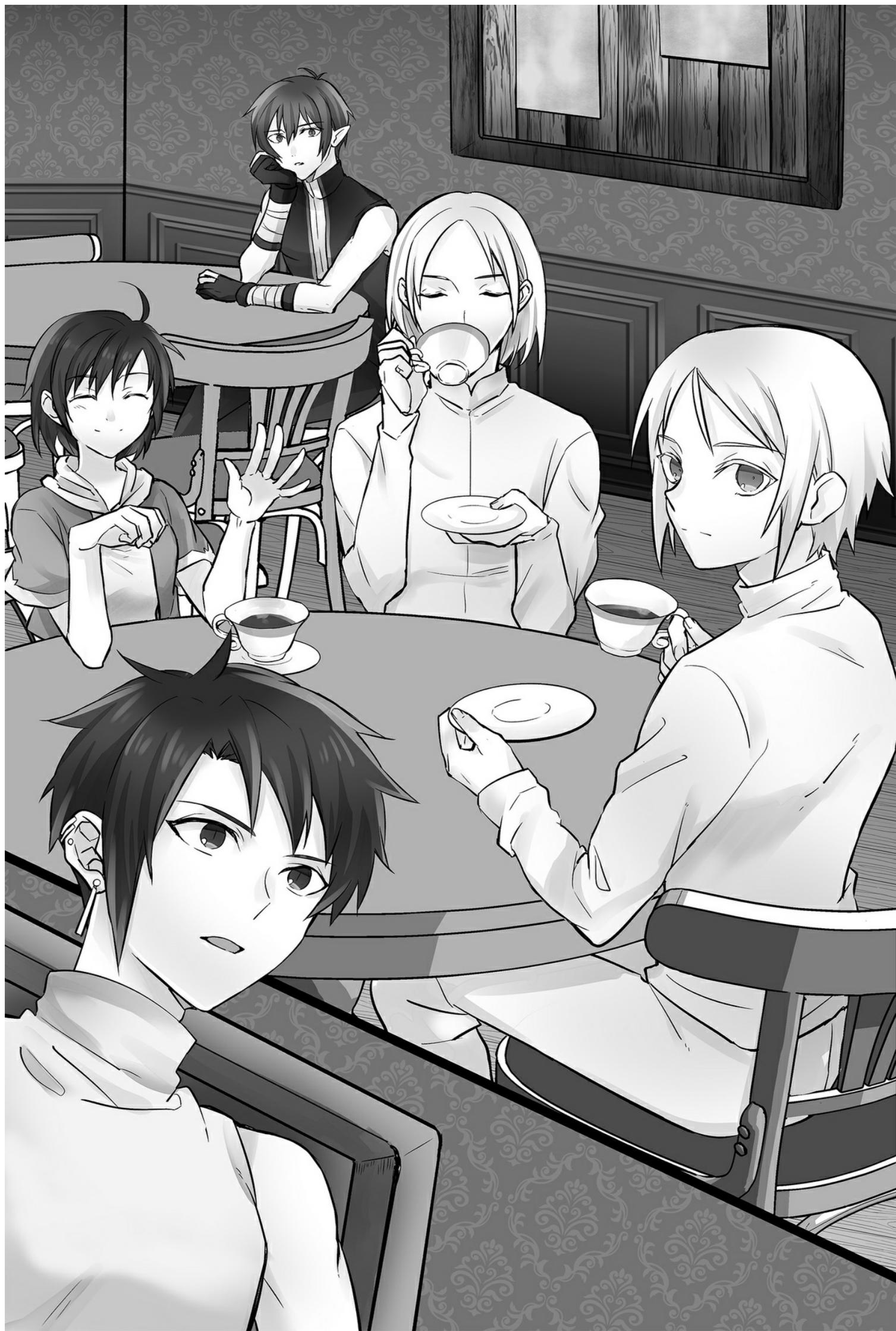
LEO descended into the dining room on the first floor where he was greeted by his party members who were in such high spirits it drove away his dampened mood. They were chatting around a circular dining table and all broke out in smiles when they noticed him coming down the stairs.

The lone woman among them sprung from her chair and welcomed him with an energetic wave. “Hey, Leo! I’m glad you’re up! How are you feeling? Doing all right?”

Leo waved back and flashed a roguish grin. “Hey there. Yeah, I’ve still got all my parts thanks to you guys.” He didn’t need anyone to tell him the rest of his party members were responsible for saving him after he lost consciousness. He figured as much. “Thanks again.”

“Anytime,” she responded, pounding her fist against her chest and settling back into her seat.

The dining room was taken over by Mina, Louis, Sutcliff of the Shadow Tribe, and Johann, who sat up ramrod straight as he always fussed about appearances. He had shed the heavy, pure-white vestment he always wore for a casual turtle-neck shirt and pants. There weren’t many opportunities to see Johann dressed in comfortable clothing, so Leo felt like he just got a rare peek into his friend’s personal life.



Leo stood directly behind Johann and looked down at him from above. “Yo, Johann. Good to see you’re still alive after yesterday.”

“And it’s good to see you are still able to bounce back like it’s nothing... Then again, even I am surprised we made it through this one alive,” Johann responded with a shrug. Then a smile softened his face. “It is thanks to everyone here that we were able to come back safe and sound. You have my heartfelt gratitude.”

Scared senseless by the suddenly sweet face he was making, Mina rushed behind him and flicked him in the back of the head. “Oh my Goddess! Johann is being sweet and modest for once!”

“Hey! That hurt!” Johann huffed, his face nearly smacking into the table with how hard she flicked him. “You’re such a jerk,” he added with a small laugh.

Louis reached out from where he sat opposite of Johann and grabbed Mina by the belt, pulling her toward him. “Behave, Mina. Why are you always so wild?”

“Who are you calling wild, mister? You act too old for your age!”

“I would prefer it if you said I’m calm and thoughtful.”

“I can’t believe you can praise yourself like that.”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough you two! Take your lover’s spat outside. You’re stuffing up the place.” Sutcliff stood up and spread out his arms between Louis and Mina to stop their endless banter.

Wow. It looks like these guys have really hit it off while I was out. Did they have a heart-to-heart while I was clonked out or something? Wish I could show Elias. I wanna prove to him what good friends he has.

Sutcliff slipped from the group and came to stand in front of Leo. Disregarding the look of confusion on Leo’s face, he bowed as deep as he could go. “Master Leo, I am deeply sorry for endangering your friends through my careless actions...!” He remained motionless with his neck exposed as if he were ready for Leo to punch him.

The others quietly watched from the table, considerately giving the two their moment to talk things out.

Leo pressed a hand to the back of his neck in thought before laying his hands on Sutcliff's shoulders. Sutcliff lifted his head in surprise and saw Leo's impish grin.

"Your actions might've triggered the chaos, but I'm not gonna hold it over your head. I know how hard you tried to help us after the fact."

Considering everyone else in the room treated Sutcliff like a friend, it seemed they had also forgiven and welcomed him into the group. Leo didn't feel like blaming him now, especially when he could tell Sutcliff sincerely regretted it.

"So let's stop bringing it up, okay? If that's not good enough for ya, I'll slug you once for Elias," Leo said jokingly, but Sutcliff's eyes glistened and he presented Leo with his right cheek.

"P-Please do! Punch me more than once!"

"Gimme a break. Not another overly serious type," Leo sighed. "Okay, how about you help out Elias and Aki instead of letting me beat ya up?" he suggested as if they were bargaining over Sutcliff's repentance. Sutcliff blinked several times in response.

Embarrassed by the absurdity of his suggestion, Leo continued as he scratched his cheek, "I know it's unheard of for the Shadow Tribe to help the Hero. But to be honest, having even one of you on our side will make our lives that much easier. We still don't know if Elias and the Dark Lord are going to go to all-out war or not."

The Shadow Tribe possessed excellent physical and magical capabilities that made them a serious threat to the Hero Party. The battle ahead would shift drastically in their favor if they could win any of them over.

"We're countin' on you," Leo said with a friendly smile, patting Sutcliff on the arm.

"Th-Thank you!" Sutcliff exclaimed, overcome with emotion. "Please tell me what I can do for Hero Elias, Boss Lady Aki, you, or the others!" He sucked in a deep breath and dropped into another dramatic bow. "Thank you very much for forgiving me!"

Sutcliff's next level of trying to atone had the opposite effect of making Leo

uncomfortable and uncertain of how to interact with him. Leo made eye contact with the rest of the group who watched on as Sutcliff kept his head lowered.

It was true Sutcliff was the cause of a great many problems, but he seemed likely to become an even greater ally. This alliance was likely going to play a key role in the future.

Leo patted Sutcliff on the shoulder for the second time and then walked back to the dining table. "So? What were you all doing down here? Just chatting?" he asked.

Johann shook his head and looked at what was laid out on the table, urging Leo to do the same.

Leo put a hand on his hip and leaned over Johann to get a better look at the thick book opened on the table. The aged pages had yellowed and torn in places. *Could this be...?* He gasped.

Johann nodded, answering his unspoken question. "It's just what you think. This is a copy of the *Book of Creation*. We were just about to read it together. Still, I can't believe there was a copy out there. Sanctuary was wrong to think they had the only copy in existence."

A copy? Then this is what Aki was talking about. Leo recalled his conversation with her in the cavern. Supposedly Sutcliff set up that quest to deliver this book to Elias per the Dark Lord's orders.

Sutcliff stood beside Leo. "Obviously. This is a precious treasure that the Shadow Tribe has hidden from Sanctuary for ages. By the way, the original was written by Ivan Clarence, and this copy was written by Lenard Gaines."

Louis turned to the last page and pointed out Lenard's scrawled signature. The ugly letters reminded Leo of his bad handwriting.

This was written by my ancestor, huh?

Lenard Gaines was one of the revolutionaries who played an active role during the Creation Era, a user of the Holy Relics, and a close friend of Ivan Clarence.

What feats did he accomplish during the Creation Era?

Why was he less known to the world than Ivan Clarence?

And what in the world could Leo do as his descendant?

Presented with the *Book of Creation* he had wanted so bad he could taste it, Leo reached out, everyone's eyes on him, and then dropped his hand with a shake of his head. Clearly, no one expected him to do that.

Johann raised an eyebrow at him. "What's wrong? Haven't you been foaming at the mouth to read this?"

"Ah, well..." Leo mumbled, scratching the back of his head. "...You see, now's not the time for it."

"Something happen?" Louis asked, worry edging into his voice.

Leo looked down. "Yeah. To tell ya the truth, Aki's waiting for me in my room."

"WHAT?!" Mina shrieked, clearly misunderstanding him.

Leo waved his hand in front of his face and clarified, "Don't get the wrong idea! She's not there for romantic reasons... There's nothing weird between us. Something happened between her and Elias. She was bawling in front of his room when I entered the hallway."

"Why?!" the others asked as one, worrying even more than before.

Leo placed his hand on his chin. "Can't say. I haven't heard the details myself. My guess is Elias lashed out at her... So I brought her to my room to ask about it."

The others shared a look before Mina spoke for the group. "I see... At least that means Elias woke up. That's good, but...it definitely sounds like he did something to upset Aki."

"...Who can blame him after all he went through?" Louis prompted in a quiet voice. "Elias is strong, but even he has to be reeling in shock and doubt. I don't think he will be able to brush it under the rug and act the way he did before like nothing ever happened."

Everyone sighed and looked away from each other.

Surprisingly, it was Johann who broke the heavy silence hanging over the room. “Good grief. Elias is such a handful,” he said in a cheerful voice that belied his somber words. “Knowing him, he’s wallowing in self-pity, blaming himself for everything that happened. He has always been that way.”

Nostalgia reflected in Johann’s eyes as he thought back on his childhood with Elias. “Elias’s remorse is stronger than anyone else because he tries to be perfect,” he continued, speaking from experience. “He believes being the perfect *Hero* is the only reason for his existence...”

Everyone’s shoulders slumped as if they had each experienced that side of Elias for themselves.

“...But his heart is still human—it’s nigh impossible for him to remain perfect every hour of the day,” Johann sighed. “So I hope this incident will help our stubborn hero realize that’s why the Hero has a party—has us.” He gave a small smile. Those lips that were so unused to turning up managed to brighten the mood.

As strong as the Hero was, there were some problems that his strength alone wouldn’t be able to solve.

In those situations, he just had to rely on his fellow party members instead of going at it alone. If his abilities couldn’t break the deadlock, then he just had to have a friend who could do it. Elias needed to learn his limitations and when to ask for help.

In a sense, Elias was an extremely prideful hero. He was obsessed with being the perfect, remarkable Hero everyone in the world looked up to. Failing in any way made him question his mere existence.

“It’s because of his perfectionism that Elias refuses to let anyone see him look weak,” Johann said. “But this time he actually vented his anger on someone—namely Aki. I think that is a good sign. She is the Hero’s Right-hand and his secretary, so it’s a part of her job to look after him when he’s having a mental breakdown. Maintaining the Hero’s mental health comes with the job.”

Johann’s word choice was so funny Leo burst out laughing. “Comes with the

job, huh? That's one way to look at it! Seriously though, Elias and Aki are both such a handful. Take your eyes off them for a minute and they get into trouble. I've gotta be there to keep them straight."

"Exactly. They think they can do everything alone," Johann agreed.

"Like you're one to talk!" Leo retorted, causing the smile to freeze on Johann's face. Everyone laughed.

Johann was trying to solve all his problems without consulting anyone either. Perhaps everyone has a side that's desperate to do whatever it takes to accomplish something alone, rather than ask for help.

Johann cleared his throat and changed the awkward topic. "Anyway, we will discuss what to do with the *Book of Creation* and where to go from here, so can you take care of Elias and Aki for us, Leo? I believe you can handle their issue best," he said to Leo, then handed Louis the *Book of Creation*.

"Leave deciphering the text to me," Louis said.

Louis must have been the most proficient with ancient script for Johann to give him the book. Having such a knowledgeable person on hand was a huge gain for their party.

Leo headed over to the dining room counter and ordered tea with honey from the innkeeper in the back.

Sweet drinks typically went over well with women. He hoped Aki would like it too. As he was thinking of Aki, Leo suddenly realized that Nako was nowhere to be seen. She was supposed to be waiting back at the inn with Johann when Leo went off to find Elias and Aki.

Leo returned to the table with two drinks on a tray. "Hey, Johann, where did Nako go? Out for more snacks?"

She was an assertive woman like Aki; maybe she went into town to buy things for her exhausted older sister.

Johann shared a look with Sutcliff and loosely shook his head. "...No, she...had to return to the Dark Lord's Castle with him to attend to some other business. I was there when she left, so I can vouch for her safety..."

Leo eyed him suspiciously.

“I’m heading back to the castle first, so I’ll check in on Lady Nako,” Sutcliff chimed in before Leo could question Johann further. “You’re better off hearing about her situation from the Dark Lord.”

From the Dark Lord? Then it had to be a topic they couldn’t discuss here. With that in mind, Leo decided not to push it.

“That works. I’m good as long as she’s okay. I’ll let Aki know. All right, I’m off to cheer up our girl.”

Then I’ll have to have a good talk with Elias and help him snap out of his funk. These two always keep me on my toes, he thought with a wry smile.

The legendary brave who carried the fate of the world on his shoulders and was worshipped as the Hero was actually just a young man who worried like the rest of mankind. He needed a good scolding when he was in the wrong too.

And we’re the only ones who can do that as his friends.

Leo started up the stairs when Mina called after him. “Take care of them, Leo!”

Without looking back, he raised the hand that wasn’t carrying the tray. “You’ve got it. I’ll do something about this. Give me advice later if I need it,” he said, ascending the stairs under the watchful eyes of his friends.

They sent him off with the hope he’d succeed in the battle ahead.

Chapter 4: Deviating Feelings

I hope I didn't worry Leo too much...

Aki sighed, releasing the tension from her shoulders as she waited for Leo to return to his room.

I love Elias...

It took losing him to realize just how big of a place he took up in her heart. She discovered how much she adored the gentle voice he reserved for her, his soft smile, and the broad back that always protected her from danger. But that realization was accompanied by another: just how much she had come to rely on him without doing anything in return. He was so hurt and depressed, and she failed to console him.

Somewhere in her heart, she had come to depend on him to make everything all right, even though she believed they were in an equally giving relationship. After seeing his lack of confidence, she noticed the heavy burden she was unconsciously pushing on him.

Elias had lived his whole life meeting the overwhelming demands placed on the Hero. This time, his hidden powers betrayed every expectation HE put on himself and trying to cope with it was driving him down a dark and spiraling thought process.

It's my job to lighten the burden on him... I was so stuck thinking about myself, I ended up relying on him without supporting him back.

She wished she had more power to share the burden with him and not become a part of it.

I'm not qualified to be with him when I'm such a weakling...

As Aki sighed for the hundredth time, she heard Leo's voice just outside the door.

"Hey, Aki, can you open the door? My hands are full."

"O-Oh, okay. Sorry I didn't notice sooner, Leo!" Aki hurried to the door and

opened it. A sweet aroma reached her nose first before Leo strolled into the room with a wooden tray.

“Sorry for the wait, m’lady. Your order has arrived.” Leo picked up one of the cups and passed it to her, adding, “Be careful, it’s hot.”

“Thank you.” She accepted the cup with both hands and peered down at the pretty dark brown tea swaying inside it. The sweet smell of honey wafted off the steam.

Leo’s kindness filled her embittered heart with joy and it showed on her face as she looked up from the swirling tea and made eye contact with him.

He held her gaze for a moment before shyly looking away.

That reminded her of Leo’s love confession in the cavern. Aki’s heart raced and she darted her eyes around the room, unsure of how else to react.

Leo said nothing as he placed his cup on the table and flopped back on the edge of the bed again.

An awkward silence followed.

Perhaps she should have gotten right to it. He invited her to his room to hear her out. But she didn’t dare bring it up and went with an entirely different subject instead.

“...W-Was anyone else downstairs?”

Leo blinked once, taken by surprise by her abrupt question. “Yeah, everyone was,” he answered, looking at the ceiling. “Mina, Louis, Sutcliff, and Johann, that is.”

“Johann! I’m glad he regained consciousness, too!”

“Yeah. He’s not back in tip-top shape yet but seemed healthy enough. He really saved our butts this time. Not sure we coulda made it back without him.” Leo cracked a wry smile as he scratched the back of his head. Aki nodded several times in agreement.

Aki remembered Johann showing up in the nick of time to heal Leo’s fatal wounds before he presented them with a plan to seal the Solar Goddess’s power. Just thinking back on how awesome he was in their time of need got her

adrenaline pumping again.

I wonder what would've come of us if Johann hadn't been there. We owe him our lives. He really was cool. That reminds me, I never did thank him for comforting me. Aki decided to thank Johann as soon as she saw him.

"...How are you feeling now, Aki? A little calmer?" Leo asked in a gentle voice. His smile was so kind it made her heart skip a beat.

Leo's waiting for me to talk... I can't make him worry forever. Keeping it pent up inside isn't going to change anything anyway. Everything Elias said was true after all.

"...Um, Leo, I'm not sure how well I can explain it, but..." Once she started talking, her entire conversation with Elias flashed forward. She buried her hands into her dress and bit her lower lip.

Once she mustered the courage, she explained what happened with Elias, occasionally tripping over her words along the way. Talking about it only made her sadder and she had to speak around her stifled sobs.

Leo listened quietly. He was letting her know that she could say anything without reservation. Before long, she was crying again.

"...It just hurt too much, I couldn't think anymore... I couldn't say a-anything to Elias..." Aki finished, dropping her gaze to her balled fists.

Even though she tried desperately not to cry, the tears poured forth without obeying her and dripped onto the back of her pale hands.

Hating herself for being a crybaby, Aki mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Pain twisted Leo's expression. He waited until she stopped sobbing to quietly say, "...I'm sorry you guys went through that. Thank you for telling me.

He returned his gaze to the ceiling as if imagining the fight between them. "The closer the person is to me, the more likely I am to hurt them, so I want to push the closest people away,' huh? Sounds like something he'd think up. He pretends to be strong when he's just a really lonely guy... He doesn't know how to interact," he muttered with a sad smile.

Leo glanced at Aki then stared off into the distance. "Frankly, I want him to

trust us more. I wish he'd get it through his head that he doesn't have to get all worked up about keeping us safe—that he'll realize we're here to do the same thing for him.”

Aki wiped away her last tear and nodded. *I want Elias to depend on me. I want his trust. And I'm not the only one who thinks that way—our whole Hero Party does. We all care about him. The strength he has in facing his opponents, his kindness toward others, all of those traits make everyone he meets want to support him.*

What must I do to become strong enough to protect Elias? Not just physical strength, but emotional.

Leo slid off the bed and sat in the chair opposite Aki. He crossed his legs and rested his chin on his folded hands.

“The way I see it, he tries too hard to be perfect. I wish he'd at least be a little more willful and ask more of his friends. But his pride won't let him. That's why...” Leo flashed Aki a teasing grin, “I was honestly shocked when you told me you guys were dating. Sure, everyone knew you guys were into each other, but I never thought he'd be able to tell you how he feels.”

Everyone knew... Aki fidgeted from the embarrassment of being told that to her face.

“After all, he showed absolutely no interest in any of the fancy princesses and drop-dead gorgeous ladies who flirted with him before. I was starting to think all women looked like slimes to him. We were starting to worry,” Leo said with a laugh.

“R-Really?”

She was going to say, “It's not like you or Johann have any women in your life either” but stopped.

They had been so busy training and studying for their war against the Dark Lord, they probably didn't have the time for romance. Their unrivaled strength may have been due to not only innate talent but also the amount of time they invested in getting stronger.

Leo narrowed his eyes, seemingly unhappy with her reply. “C'mon now, you

know better than anyone how oblivious he is when it comes to romance. Though his status as Hero likely played an even bigger role in him not getting involved with any women... Or more like, he was purposely trying not to get attached to others. Until he met you.”

Aki bashfully looked away from Leo’s sudden soft smile. It sounded as though she had become someone so special to Elias he couldn’t run away from love anymore.

Whether he knew how she was feeling or not, Leo continued with his ears turning pink, “...I know exactly how he feels.”

“Pardon?” Aki looked at his face and he immediately turned his head toward the window to avoid her eyes.

“I mean, you’re no peerless beauty—”

“Hey, what’s that—”

“But you give everything your all,” he continued over her. “I’m pretty sure you had it rough being summoned to this unknown world. But instead of running away, you accepted it and assertively asked us questions. And then you even went the extra mile to help us out when we needed it, right? You came across as really lovable and cute—ack, what am I sayin’?!”

Red rushed to Leo’s cheeks and he scratched the back of his head. Aki pursed her lips at his endless praise. But he didn’t let his compliments end there. He gazed sincerely into her eyes.

“Ah, whatever. Might as well say it all while I’m at it. It’s because of your personality that I want to be with you and encourage you. And when I see you in danger, it makes me think I should stick around to protect you. Once I started thinking that way, I, well, began fallin’ for ya.”

Aki blushed profusely and hung her head. It was almost as if Leo was confessing his feelings to her a second time. Being told those things by a wonderful and sincere man like Leo filled her with a mix of joy, nervous butterflies, and shyness.

Leo turned his head away again and glanced back with only his eyes. “So I think that’s what made him fall in love with you.”

“Y-You think so...?”

Ahhh! This is so embarrassing! Aki's face burned so bad she couldn't look up.

Leo cleared his throat to clear the air. “Anyway, Elias has never had anyone like you in his life. And that's why he was so desperate to protect you as the Hero and as a man. But so much happened all at once, he failed at both,” Leo said persuasively. Aki gave a small nod.

“He's definitely wallowing in self-pity because he feels responsible for getting you hurt. Hence the breakup speech... Sheesh. That's where he shoulda said I'll become strong enough to protect you from now on,” Leo teased.

Aki laid her right hand over her heart. *I don't want my relationship to end with him... At this rate, he will put up his Hero wall, seal his heart off, and pretend not to notice it.*

She didn't want to see Elias's forced smile again. Rather than a fake expression directed at strangers, she wanted him to give her that blissful smile reserved for his lover.

Finally discovering what she really wanted, Aki looked at the teacup sitting on the table and asked, “...Leo, what should I do?”

“About what?” He tilted his head.

She leaned on the table, her butt hovering a few inches off her chair. “I don't want Elias to end up alone like this... I don't want to break up with him!” At last, her true desires became words.

Though she didn't want Elias to end up alone, she also wanted to be the only woman he ever loved. She didn't want to give him up—she wanted him to herself. Perhaps it was wrong to harbor these feelings for the world's Hero, but that was how she felt.

“Because I love Elias...!” she announced in a trembling voice.

As she became aware of how great her feelings for him were, the fresh memory of him feebly shaking his head saying they should end things entered her thoughts.

What did she have to do to pull him out of his slump? Would she never be

able to reach him again now that he had pulled back into his shell?

The thought was enough to crush her heart and bring hot tears streaming down her cheeks. She tried to fight them off by gnawing her lip to no avail.

Leo sadly watched Aki hiccup and choke on her words. He seemed hesitant to say anything until he couldn't bear to see her weep any longer.

"...Don't cry," he said in a strained voice.

His voice sounded so deep, Aki couldn't help looking up at him and blinking back the tears.

Leo's sharp gaze held her captive. "Don't cry, Aki," he repeated stronger this time. "I didn't nearly die in that last battle to see you dissolve into tears. That's not why I fought him... That's not what I fought Elias for!"

"Leo...?"

Leo jumped up and strode over to Aki. He looked down at her as if her words had deeply hurt him. She looked up at his confusing expression and tilted her head.

"Leo, what's—"

"Please, Aki!"

Aki placed her right hand on the table to stand when Leo reached out and pulled her tightly to him. As she blinked repeatedly, his hair tickled the top of her shoulder and her cheek.

"L-Leo...?" Eyes spinning, she stiffened in his arms. His hands tightened on her back. He hugged her so tight she struggled to breathe.

"I know this is a cowardly time to ask this, but...am I not good enough for you...?" he whispered in her ear.



Understanding exactly what he meant, Aki gasped.

“I won’t hurt your feelings and make you cry alone like this. I don’t want you to look this sad ever again...”

“L-Leo...”

My chest hurts... I can feel just how much he cares about me, my heart aches. Why...? Wrapped in Leo’s strong arms, Aki placed her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. Why is it people rarely ever fall in love at the same time with the same person?

Just one small deviation can change everything.

“You even told me you loved me back... It made me wonder if miracles like this could really happen to someone like me. You taught me what happiness is. Thanks to you, I was glad to be alive for the first time.”

What Elias said to her earlier that day suddenly came to mind.

There is no greater miracle in life than being in love with a person who loves you back just as much.

Aki didn’t want to lose that miracle.

“...Aki,” Leo passionately uttered her name. Her heart did a little flip. “...I love you...just as much as he does,” he whispered in a husky voice.

A single tear rolled down Aki’s cheek. She despised herself for being unable to respond to his strong feelings for her.

Leo released her without another word. His feverish gaze met her bewildered eyes. Her very breath was taken away by the deep purple gleam of his eyes and his handsome visage.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her back to him when she refused to even breathe in his presence. “I won’t hold back if he’s given up on you,” he announced inches from her face.

Startled, Aki looked away from the ardor burning in his eyes and shook her head back and forth.

“Leo, I...”

I can't return his feelings. It's Elias I love. I won't give up on him even if I've lost my place in his life. But maybe that's how Leo feels about me too. It's impossible to just will away your feelings.

When Aki said no more, Leo instantly let go of her. He turned around faster than she could say anything.

“...I'll go check on Elias,” he said quickly and walked away from her.

Aki reached for his back. “Leo! Wai—”

“You wait here,” he ordered in a quiet voice.

Trembling, she dropped her hand. His back rejected further conversation, causing words to fail her and she pressed her lips together instead.

Leo left the room without looking back. The door shut with a cold thud. She was left alone once more.

...*Why?* Aki bit the inside of her cheek and slid down to her knees in the painful silence. *Why did it come to this?*

Chapter 5: To Trust and Be Trusted

ELIAS snuck out of the inn through the window and was now sitting on the edge of an empty quay at the end of Port City's wharf, gazing out at the moored boats. Neatly folded white sails stood in rows against the clear blue sky, reflecting the sunlight to an almost blinding degree.

Under normal circumstances, taking in beautiful scenery would lift his spirits. But it did nothing to cheer him up after he ran away. He stared at the port, his mind adrift.

What in the world am I doing?

Elias knew leaving without saying a word to the others would only cause heartache for them. Not even he could figure out what he was trying to achieve by burdening the people he cared about.

Disappointed in himself, Elias shifted his gaze from the vibrant blue sea to the people going about their business in the harbor. He watched men busily unloading ships shouting orders back and forth, people anxiously standing around on the wharf waiting to board a ship to their destination, and stores putting out freshly caught fish to sell to the morning crowds.

Dressed in a pale-blue shirt and slacks, Elias had left his room without his cloak, epaulets, gloves, and the rest of his equipment. Even the Holy Sword he usually wore like an extension of his arm was sitting back in his room, leaving him entirely defenseless and at odds with himself.

He wanted to go out for once as something—someone—other than the Hero.

If I was just a normal person, what would my life be like? I bet I...

Elias was trying to run from reality—from the cruel reality of hurting his friends. And from the reality of being the Hero.

Even though he knew all too well that nothing would change by fleeing. It only made him feel emptier.

Falling deeper into pensive thought, Elias sighed, and as he did, he spotted a young couple buying fish and fruit from one of the storefronts he was absently

staring at. The girlfriend was happily pointing at the contents in their basket and smiled up at the boyfriend in front of her.

Looks like fun...

As he enviously watched them, the woman gradually started to look like Aki. And before long, the boyfriend started looking like himself. Elias imagined himself and Aki in their shoes.

If I was born as a normal man and Aki was born as a normal woman in this world...would we have met, become friends, and eventually fall in love like that couple?

Then we could've gone shopping together, come back to the same home, talked about our day, slept in the same bed...where I would wake up next to her in the morning. We could even eat breakfast together.

...That would've been true happiness.

Elias could only imagine what being normal was like, but he assumed it came with a kind of happiness that he could only get by living like everyone else. But he wasn't like everyone else.

Elias shook his head, chasing away the dream of another life, and turned away from the happy couple.

His gaze tracked the seagulls riding the wind, but his mind barely registered what he was looking at.

True happiness...is impossible for me.

Fantasizing about his dream life was pointless. He wouldn't exist if he wasn't the Hero.

I don't have value as anything else.

"Why was I ever even..."

Born.

He tightened his hands over his knees.

My existence is meaningless if I can't fulfill my duty.

The sea breeze blowing through the harbor gently tousled his hair, as if to

soothe Elias as he struggled to accept the meaning of his life.

Sitting here doing nothing isn't going to get me anywhere... Though he thought that way, he didn't know where else to go after rejecting his place in life.

"...Oi," a terribly familiar voice said gruffly behind him as he sank deeper into brooding.

Elias looked back with a start, removing his hand from his aching head. Behind him stood Leo with his hand on his hip, wearing casual clothes instead of his usual gear.

"Leo..." Elias said, frowning at being found.

"Man, I had to search hard for you. What're you doin' out without your sword?" Leo scolded, his brows snapped together as he walked over.

Elias had been too down in the dumps to notice his presence.

Leo sat down next to him and leaned back on his hands on the quay with his feet dangling off the edge. He had come empty-handed despite nagging Elias about leaving without the Holy Sword. Squinting against the sunlight reflecting off the sea, Leo stared out at the horizon.

"Good view you've got here. Come to think of it, we've been to this city plenty of times but never once enjoyed looking around the harbor."

Elias briefly glanced at Leo's side profile before fastening his gaze on the dazzling water surface. "I guess...not. We were always in a rush. We always headed back into the Field to defeat more monsters after taking a short rest or hopped on a ship to the next city. Never had much time to take it easy here," he quietly responded, taking another quick look at Leo.

Leo didn't look angry or upset, his lips simply curved into a slight smile as he lent an ear to Elias.



The two listened to the hustle and bustle of the wharf while sitting next to each other in silence.

Looking at Leo only reminded Elias of the moment he mercilessly cut down his back in the Ancient Ruins. Thinking back on it, Leo had fought carefully to avoid dealing any lethal wounds to Elias. He concentrated more on defense than offense.

On the opposite hand, Elias's attacks were the real deal, sparing no concern for accidentally killing his opponent. He savagely hunted Leo down and dealt a heavy blow to him with each vicious strike.

Elias vaguely remembered losing all sense of Leo being his ally and being ready to take his life if the opportunity presented itself.

If Johann and Aki hadn't arrived in the nick of time, he might've finished Leo off when he had him pinned to the ground. Fear roiled in his gut just thinking about it.

Elias lifted his shaking hands above his head and stared at them as if they were foreign objects that didn't belong to him.

I need to apologize to Leo and the others. I can't just draw away from them without an apology.

Plus, Leo probably came looking for me because he's worried. I'm sure he has a lot he wants to say, but instead of criticizing me, he's patiently waiting for me to speak up first.

Elias was constantly saved by his best friend's clumsy kindness. He felt pathetic for lacking the courage to properly respond in kind.

I've got to stop causing problems for him, Elias thought, taking a deep breath before facing Leo.

"Hey, Leo..." He was so nervous the words lodged in his throat and his voice cracked. Hearing him, Leo silently turned toward Elias. Feeling his mouth rapidly drying out, Elias held Leo's gaze. "Um, er, well, I'm sorry for all the stupid stuff —"

He tried to bow as he apologized, but Leo smacked his head faster than he

could react. Not expecting to be karate chopped, Elias glared at him.

“O-Ow! What was that for—”

“Don’t apologize!”

Elias shirked back from his shouting. Leo leaned closer and pointed his finger at Elias’s face before he could reflexively apologize again.

“Shove your stupid clichéd thought process that you caused problems for us! Everybody knows you didn’t mean to do it! Nobody’s mad at you for that. So stop your worrying.” A kind smile suddenly spread across Leo’s lips as if to soften his words and cheer Elias up. “And quit being depressed already! You moping around all day is more annoying for us!” he added, a wicked gleam flashing in his eyes as he flicked Elias’s forehead.

Dazed, Elias pressed his hand to the stinging flesh and stared back at Leo.

Does that mean they are willing to forgive me? When I don’t deserve it?

The pent-up tension left his body like the tide after he realized forgiveness was possible for him.

Warmth filled him with the knowledge of his friends’ kindness and acceptance. He had done something unforgivable. That’s how he felt, but, deep down, he wanted forgiveness. He never really wanted to leave his friends—he just didn’t know what else to do. He stubbornly rejected what he really wanted.

Realizing his true feelings for the first time, Elias exhaled a long, strenuous sigh and sat up straight. He bowed to Leo to express his heartfelt gratitude.

“Leo, th-thank—” Before he could finish speaking, a single teardrop slipped down his cheek and splashed on his lap.

Elias vowed to never cry before another human being, yet in a single day, he had cried in front of Aki and Leo. Had he lost control over his emotions next?

No, this is who I really am... I’ve always just pretended to be strong when I’m weak.

Wincing, Leo scratched his head and looked back out at the waves, knowing Elias would rather not have his best friend see him cry.

“...C’mon, don’t cry, buddy,” he said quietly. “I think this is the first time I’ve seen you shed a tear. I’m not gonna comment like Johann would, but I do think it’s a good sign. Is this thanks to Aki’s influence, too?” He smiled suggestively and continued without looking at Elias, “...You know, she was crying. Not that you didn’t hear her.”

Lost for words, Elias looked down at his hands in his lap.

He heard her crying through the door so he knew his words had hurt her bad enough she couldn’t even walk back to her room before breaking down. Though he knew it, he left her to cry alone. After all, he wanted her to hate him for being the horrible man who had dumped her so suddenly.

When he heard Leo run over and start talking to her, Elias thought it was for the best.

Because I thought I could give up on her... Leo is far superior to me, both as a person and as a man. So I thought he’d be better for her...

Unaware of Elias’s thoughts, Leo kept his gaze trained on the horizon as he said, “Speaking of which, I wouldn’t have guessed you two became a couple. I mean, I expected it might happen someday, but sounds like something good happened to push you guys along. I heard all about it from Aki.” He cracked a carefree grin.

Elias looked up and wordlessly returned his smile.

Elias took a deep breath, pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and rested his head on top. Maybe he was trying to subconsciously protect himself from the scariness of professing his true feelings by making himself as small as possible.

“I...”

The seagulls had been squawking and grunting around them the whole time, but they sounded so much louder now. Elias started pouring out his feelings in a thin voice that was nearly lost in the noise.

“I...fell in love with her the way a man does a woman...”

He felt like he was confessing his sins.

Leo didn't say anything or push him to say more, he merely sat there listening.

"I...wanted her...wanted Aki to be mine."

Elias grew more self-conscious and embarrassed about the depth of his desires as he shared them. But since he had never discussed his human emotions before, he was more interested in talking it out with someone than hiding his embarrassment, especially when that someone was his best friend.

"...But it was wrong to want that," Elias bemoaned between gritted teeth, trying to convey how he really felt without dressing it up. "I can't control my feelings when it comes to her... To the point I let the Goddess's power take over me."

Elias wasn't all too surprised the Solar Goddess's immense power was dormant inside him when he was her creation. In retrospect, it actually explained why the Hero had superhuman physical strength.

If only he realized it sooner, the events of the other day could have been avoided.

"I hurt all the people I vowed to protect because I couldn't control myself..." Overcome with the despair of being unable to stop his mindless rampage, Elias buried his forehead into his knees. "...I failed as a Hero," he confessed in a strangled voice. "I don't even know who I'm supposed to be anymore..."

He looked at the ground through his knees and groaned, "I can't stop worrying about things," before Leo could say anything.

I'm a tool created by the Goddess.

He had obsessively clung to his role as Hero to blot out the reality of being a mere tool, but now that he'd failed the one thing that kept him going, he didn't know how to proceed anymore.

However, no matter how much he wanted to run away, he couldn't escape his duty. Only he could be the Hero, no one else could ever stand in his shoes.

At a glance, everyone admired and wanted to be him, never realizing that being the world's hero just meant being confined to a bejeweled cage from

birth till death.

He desperately contemplated how he could prevent his friends from being chained inside the same cage.

“I don’t think I should stick around any longer,” he admitted in a shaky voice. “Leaving will keep you safer. The same goes for Aki... I love her, but it’s better to be apart...”

The closer I am to someone, the greater they will get hurt. The nearer they are to me, the more unlikely I am to protect them. That especially applies to Aki. I thought I could do an even better job of protecting the woman I love, but I couldn’t save her from myself. Now I know for sure that she, as the person closest to me, will be in the greatest danger of all.

Elias couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to her because of him.

He finally sat up and glanced at Leo who looked like he had a lot to say. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m going to the Dark Lord’s Castle alone—” he started and stopped up short when he was positive he heard a blood vessel pop in Leo’s temple. Chilled to the bone, he instinctively scooted away just as Leo’s hands came down hard on the cobblestone.

“SHUT UUUPPPPP!”

Leo’s enraged shout echoed through the harbor, freezing Elias in place.

Did I just tick Leo off beyond return?

“All I’ve been hearing for the last ten minutes is your tireless whining. We knew we’d be in danger the day we signed up to be a member of your party! We’re with you despite the potential risks! What the hell do you think of us?!” Leo told Elias off as if he were a disobedient little boy, his shoulders rising and falling with his angry breathing.

Though Elias shirked away, he could tell Leo was trying to explain his feelings in his own way, and he looked him square in the eye.

I need to face what he said. I have to seriously take his words into consideration and change for the better. It’s only my friends who will tell me when I’m in the wrong.

It's then that Elias realized his decision to make their lives easier by leaving for good only had the reverse effect of trampling all over their feelings. What he thought was helping was actually a slap in the face.

I can't do it without them. I was acting self-righteous. By being stubborn and stuck in my head, I betrayed the only people who really believe in me and nearly did something that couldn't be undone this time.

Leo thrust his finger at Elias as if to drive the point home. "You've been going on and on about hurting the people closest to you, but everybody does that. Same goes for me. I cause the most trouble for you, Johann, and Aki because you matter to me." He grabbed Elias by the shoulders and raised his voice to knock it into his thick skull. "What's that got to do with anything?! Don't disappear from our lives over somethin' so human! What do you actually want to do?"

"Me...?" Elias blinked.

"What do YOU want?!" Leo demanded.

What do I want...?

"I..." Elias gaped at the unexpected question.

Growing impatient with him, Leo shook his shoulders. "Yeah, your wants! That matters a thousand times more than what your status as Hero calls for. If you're gonna toss Aki aside because you lack the balls to protect her, then I'll make her mine in your place! You okay with that? Huh?!"

Leo essentially declared war for Aki's hand and that aroused the fight in Elias.

Someone was going to take Aki from him. She was going to be with a different man.

The instant he imagined her laughing in another man's arms, the emotions he kept bottled up exploded.

"You can't!" he shouted at Leo before he even realized what he was saying. He ground the rest of his feelings into him before he could retort. "I don't want anyone else to have Aki! She's my...my..." The rest of the words lodged in his throat and came out as a groan.

Man up, Elias! I'll lose what matters most to me if I don't speak up. Stop ignoring your feelings to keep up appearances. I'll never change if I remain silent. It's all right to speak about my honest feelings and desires as Elias. My friends will allow it. Leo is waiting for it.

"She's my...woman!" All the strength went whooshing out of his body, and he felt dizzy after he professed his feelings. He hadn't even realized how high strung he was until he felt the heat burning his cheeks and his shoulders trembling.

Did it always take so much energy to speak up? Was this the first time he had voiced his repressed desires?

Silence filled the momentary pause between them. It wasn't until the wind started to go out of Elias's sails that Leo beamed like a little boy who had finally gotten his way.

"Well said! Now I can finally take you on fair and square! I was this close to pushing you into the ocean to cool off your fat head!" Leo teased, punching Elias in the arm.

"Hey!" Elias laughed.

"You deserved it!" Leo retorted, grinding his fist into Elias's shoulder.

Elias threw a right punch, which Leo rolled away from and responded with a left hook that Elias caught in his hand, starting a playful fight that they laughed throughout.

Elias was having so much fun. He was so happy to have someone to cheer him up when he felt down. A friend to save him in a time of need.

I'm not alone. I don't have to bear the burden of Hero on my own.

Once he was able to think that way, the anvil on his back lifted, and color filled his dark world again. And it came with the realization that his friends had been looking out for him all along, and just how much Aki's smile had saved him from himself.

Frustrated with how childish he was being, Elias punched Leo extra hard for laughing next to him.

Caught by surprise, Leo shouted “Now you’re asking for it!” and shot out his fist, which Elias caught while flashing a toothy grin.

As he fooled around with his best friend, Elias gazed up at the blue sky that looked a hundred times brighter now than when he was trapped with his dark thoughts.

I can do this with everyone at my side. I know their presence will take me further than ever.

Chapter 6: Monster Attack

I wonder where Elias and Leo went.

Aki wandered Port City's main thoroughfare wearing nothing more than the casual red dress and short leather boots Mina had prepared for her.

After hearing what happened between her and Elias, Leo told her to wait in his room while he confronted Elias, but she grew impatient and snuck over to check on them. Neither Elias nor Leo was inside.

Surprised to find Elias's room empty, Aki rushed downstairs and found the rest of their party gathered in the dining room's lounge area. Everyone took her panicked news calmly, and their group concluded "Aki should look for the boys in town first before we all go out searching."

When she asked why, they avoided the question and strongly asserted she look for the boys alone, so here she was roaming the city in search of them.

They really should have helped! I can't use magic to find people or to send messages like Johann and Leo can. I'm clearly a lot less likely to find them on my own.

Stuck in an absurd situation, Aki hopelessly scanned her surroundings.

Her feet carried her near the city's main gate, and she could see the stone walls and the open arabesque iron gate at the end of the road that continued straight ahead.

Oh, that's the gate we passed through when we initially arrived at Port City.

It filled Aki with nostalgia as she remembered the day she traveled through the main Field with Elias, Leo, and Johann for the first time. At the time, she was just enthusiastic about the journey to come. But after everything she learned about this world and herself during the last Quest, her excitement had been replaced by apprehension.

Our next destination is finally going to be... Aki shifted her gaze from the iron gate to the vast blue sky. Once she located Elias and Leo and regrouped with the others, their next destination was the Dark Lord's Castle.

I'm going to see the Dark Lord again at last.

When she thought about it, it was that first encounter with the Dark Lord in her apartment that led her to this world to take her kidnapped sister back from him. Until recently, she always believed that meeting the Dark Lord again would mark the end of her journey.

But after reuniting with Nako along the way and learning the Dark Lord might not be the true enemy, after all, she had lost sight of what the real end goal was now.

Meeting the Dark Lord isn't an endpoint, but a turning point leading to new challenges. I have a feeling it will guide us to uncovering the secrets of the Hero, the Dark Lord, their Right-hands, the Goddesses, and this world's very foundation.

One of Elias's last comments suddenly invaded her thoughts: *"I plan to go to the Dark Lord's Castle alone."* Aki looked up at the gate with a start.

Elias can't possibly have left without us, right?

He was capable of anything. With the charged mirror, he could just ask for help from a Royal Court Mage to send him on a one-way trip to the Dark Lord's Castle.

Was he already on his way there? Was he really the type to leave everyone—to leave Aki—without a word?

Aki tried to convince herself that he wasn't, but she anxiously stared at the gate. *I have no guarantee that Elias wouldn't leave without us. He's done nothing to make me think otherwise.*

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach as she thought of his empty room and the last words he said to her.

Has he already gone somewhere out of reach this time? I don't want that...

His tranquil smile and the warmth of his big hand holding hers came to mind.

I love Elias. I love him so much, I can't suppress these feelings. I'd be so lonely if he's gone, I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Aki always believed they would be together as long as she was in this world

because they were bound as Hero and the Hero's Right-hand. But now that she might lose him for good, she realized her arrogance. If she didn't grab hold of his hand, he was going to move on, leaving behind that sad smile as the final reminder of what they once had. Elias was going to take all the burdens on himself and disappear.

If I don't want that to happen, I need to grab his hand and never let him go.

"Please still be somewhere in this city, Elias...!"

Aki sprinted toward the gate, driven by emotion. She hoped she could run into him near the main city exit if he did intend to leave. Something told her she could stop him, even if she was a little late at saying what needed to be said.

As she ran, Aki suddenly heard screaming and shouting in the distance.

What's going on?

Shuddering, she slowed her pace as she neared the gate where the commotion grew several times louder. A giant, squirming black blob charged toward her—it was a crowd of people madly running away, their hair flying in every direction. The ground shook with their escape, and a cloud of dust kicked up around the area.

People fled past either side of Aki, not caring she was standing there confused. They seemed to be fleeing from the gate.

"E-Excuse me!" Aki called out, hoping to ask someone what had happened, but no one heard her as they raced by screaming.

Growing impatient, she reached out to grab hold of someone, but their shoulders banged into her as the wave of people grew more erratic and she barely kept herself from being swept away with them.

"What're you standing around for, miss?!" A middle-aged fisherman outran the human stampede and grabbed Aki by the shoulder. He seemed worried that she wasn't running with the rest of the crowd.

Glad someone finally stopped, Aki was about to ask him when he yelled at her.

"Don't you know what's going on?! You'll be devoured by monsters if you

hang around here!”

Monsters?

“What monsters? I was on the other side of the city until now so I don’t know what’s happening!” Aki raised her voice as loud as she could to prevent it from being drowned out.

“Now’s not the time to talk about it, but fine!” The fisherman nodded when he realized she wasn’t going to move otherwise. He spoke loudly next to her ear. “A section of the Goddess Barrier just failed and monsters are pouring in through it! It was the section protecting the gate!

“A horde of monsters are charging right into the city! The city guard and Guild Adventurers are holding them off for now, but who knows how much time we have before monsters breakthrough! So get running, lady!” He pushed her back in the direction she had come from. “Stay far away from the gate!”

The Goddess Barrier failed? Shock rooted her to the ground.

The Goddess Barriers existed to separate the spaces where humans and monsters lived. She had created the barriers to keep human cities and towns safe from being overrun by the monsters living in the Field.

Was this barrier’s failure a sign that the Goddess’s powers were falling out of balance? In other words, it was just the beginning of the catastrophe brought about by the depleting Creation Energy.

The Hero and Dark Lord are born out of a need to replenish the world’s Creation Energy... Aki thought back to the harrowing secrets Johann had told her at the start of their journey.

Basically, the fact that Elias and the Dark Lord were even around meant the world was running low on Creation Energy. If one of them didn’t die soon, these kinds of disasters were going to increase. Or at least that was the theory.

“C’mon, lady! Get moving! Normal citizens like us will only get in the way if we’re still here when the monsters get through!”

“I-It’s okay!” Aki shook her head and tugged back as the fisherman tried to drag her away from the gate. Annoyed that she was refusing to budge, the man

whipped back toward her. She leaned forward and spoke before he could yell again. "I'm an Adventurer too!"

"Huh? You?!" He gaped at her.

"I can't go with you. I have to fight with the others to protect the city!" she explained, wrenching her hand loose.

"H-Hey!" Dumbfounded, he reached for her, but Aki was already running through the crowd.

She weaved through the fleeing cityfolk, careful not to bump into anyone, which made it take longer to get anywhere.

I have to hurry! I need to reach the gate before more people get hurt!

Heart pounding in her ears, Aki raced at full speed toward the gate.

By the time she arrived at the main square leading out of town, she was met by a catastrophic sight.

A flock of demi-vultures swarmed overhead, blotting out the blue sky. Their shadows fell on the green plains of the Field like sharks circling underwater. The demi-vultures flapped their bat-like wings as they let out ear-piercing screeches.

Aki swallowed hard and fearfully shifted her gaze from the sky to the ground where demi-monsters that looked like magically enhanced wolves and leopards rushed on the open gate with their maws wide open.

The gatekeepers, city guards, and Guild Adventurers bravely fended off the monsters, trying to keep them from pouring into the city. One of the Warriors swung his glinting sword around, knocking back the monsters lunging at him, while the mage behind him unleashed a fireball that burst like fireworks on impact.

High-level Adventurers accustomed to fighting monsters appeared to be doing well but injured and moaning novices were falling left and right. Priests kneeled by the injured and frantically cast heal.

The corpses of fallen monsters were scattered around the dusty ground, and other monsters feasted on their flesh.

Standing amid the din of monster roars, Adventurers shouting spells and

orders, and the emergency bells ringing to alert the citizens of danger, Aki realized she was in the middle of a battlefield the likes of which she had only read about in books.

“This is horrible...” Aki’s legs refused to budge before the horrors unfolding in front of her.

She gritted her teeth to stop them from chattering and breathed slowly to calm her panic. This was the disaster that awaited when a Goddess Barrier failed even partially.

Monsters feasted on humans. It made sense they would charge in once the doors to their favorite buffet opened.

I have to fight. I can't let fear stop me. I'm the Hero's Right-hand. I'm charged with protecting this world. I've received power from the Goddess to do just that.

Aki watched as the peaceful town square transformed into a bloody battlefield. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose.

I won't let Elias bear every burden alone. It's because I always rely on him for everything even after becoming a couple that he was driven to lose his mind.

Aki reached into her pocket and pulled out the silver pen.

All right, Lunar Goddess. I don't know if you're my friend or foe yet, but lend me the power I need to help Elias, to no longer be dead weight, and to shoulder the same fate as him.

“I’m going to protect everyone even when you can’t, Elias...!”

So watch me show off that I can fight too!

“Lunar Goddess, lend me your strength!”

Heat burned in the center of Aki’s forehead. The first time she experienced borrowing the Lunar Goddess’s power, the shock and pain caused her to faint, but now she knew it was a sign of receiving power.

She was going to master this cursed blessing only she could use and fight bravely alongside the Hero Party.

Aki concentrated on the pen gripped in her lowered right hand. Silver light

stretched like putty into a bow. When the brilliant light dissipated, it left behind a beautiful bow with golden embellishments, and a leather quiver appeared on her shoulder.

Every time she transformed her pen into a weapon, she remembered how Leo burst out laughing about it the first time, saying how much she fit the part of the Hero's secretary.

That's right. I'm the Hero's Right-hand and his secretary. I need to drive off the monsters and protect the people in a way fitting of the Hero Party.

Adventurers and the city guard were concentrating on defending inside the gate, so Aki decided her skills could serve them better repelling the monsters from the outside. Bow and quiver summoned, Aki dashed through the chaotic square and out the gate.

"Come back! It's dangerous out there!" one of the gatekeepers bellowed after her.

His voice and the gate at her back, Aki charged into the open Field.

Vast green plains stretched on for miles. Various guard and Adventurer parties were battling monsters to slow the horde from breaching the walls. It was even more chaotic than inside Port City, with monsters and people clashing in every direction. The metallic smell of blood permeated the area, and Aki could taste the blood in the air.

This is awful...

She stood in the Field surrounded by roaring monsters and the sound of swords meeting teeth and exhaled through her nose to calm down. Countless monsters blanketed the sky and the ground—she couldn't charge in recklessly and expect to be of help.

Calm down. Aim carefully at each target and steadily decrease their numbers!

Aki silenced the fear and exhilaration of battle bubbling up inside her and set her sights on the screeching demi-vultures.

Archers excelled at attacking monsters at distances where swords and other short-range weapons couldn't reach. While they inflicted less damage than

Warriors and Fighters, they were necessary to handle aerial monsters.

Therefore, Aki's job was to shoot down as many flying monsters as possible before they swooped down on her allies.

Aki nocked an arrow and tilted her bow back. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the guards frantically pushing the gate closed from both sides to suppress the monster invasion.

However, monsters stampeded into town before they could finish closing it, and the guards were forced to deal with the new threat rather than seal the gate.

I can't let anymore get close to the gate!

Aki asked the Lunar Goddess to give her arrows as much range and damage as possible and aimed at one of the low-flying demi-vultures.

Heat stung her forehead as the Lunar Goddess's crest formed there. Aki drew back the arrow and narrowed her eyes on the target. She loosed the arrow at the demi-vulture swooping down with a deafening screech.

Please hit!

An arrow bathed in silver light cut through the wind like a comet. As it approached the monster, the arrow divided into multiple parts like stardust, shining like a meteor shower in the daytime sky, and pierced several giant monster birds flying in the sky.

It was the mercilessly beautiful judgment passed down on the monsters by the Goddess—at least that's how the sheer magnitude of the attack looked to Aki.

She was awestruck by the attack. As she stood there in a daze, demi-vultures fell from the sky like hail.

I've never been able to do wide-area attacks before... Did chanting the ancient magic with Leo and Johann help me draw out more of the latent Goddess power?

Adventurers and guards looked from the sky that had been instantly cleansed of the black flock of death to Aki with hope in their eyes.

“Holy Goddess, you’re strong! What kind of bow is that...?!” One of the Adventurers enthusiastically ran over to her.

Aki finally awoke from her stupor when he shook her by the shoulder.

I did it... I took out a bunch of monsters on my own. I nearly lost all confidence after what happened with Elias, but maybe I should place more faith in my abilities after all. It’s time to put my doubts and insecurities behind me!

Aki held the bow in her left hand and placed her right hand over her heart. “Hello! I’m the Hero’s Right-hand Aki! The rest of the Hero Party is handling matters elsewhere, but I will do my best to assist you on my own! I’m sure the others will rush over soon!”

Every person on the battlefield who heard her cheered.

“That’s reassuring! We’re glad to have the Hero’s Right-hand on our side!” The man shook her hand and then shouted at the top of his lungs to the parties fighting further away. “HEEEY! The Hero’s Right-hand is providing back up!”

Anyone who could spare a moment to look over did so, raising their weapons in acknowledgment.

“Hell yeah! A goddess has come to aid us!

“Let’s clear the Field!”

“Don’t let monsters into the city!”

Letting out battle cries, the humans charged the monsters.

A g-goddess? Aki was surprised by the way the other Adventurers looked at her. Maybe the Hero’s Right-hand is also a symbol of hope to the people? Then I’d better step up to the plate.

The Hero’s Right-hand wasn’t very useful if all they did was follow mindlessly behind the Hero. She needed to stand as his equal on the battlefield to actually assist him.

I can’t stay in Elias’s shadow forever.

Closing her eyes, Aki took a deep breath and raised her bow overhead. “Let’s protect the city together! We are going to win this fight!” she declared in a loud

voice she never knew she was capable of.

The Adventurers who heard smiled and raised their weapons in response.

“The rest of the Hero Party is on their way,” the Adventurer beside her shouted. “We just have to hold out till they arrive!”

That news gave the various parties the extra burst of morale they needed to drive their swords into the next wave of monsters. Their victory cheers after each successful kill bolstered Aki’s morale in return. It told her she wasn’t fighting alone.

I have people who will fight alongside me. It’s not just my party members, but also the people of this world who are fighting toward the same goals.

She hoped Elias would realize that soon too. The people of this world weren’t just pathetic creatures that needed to be protected, but allies willing to fight for the same cause. If only he knew, then maybe some of the burdens he shouldered would lessen. Maybe he wouldn’t feel so isolated.

Aki was going to fight to show him that the people didn’t just need a Hero to protect them all the time.

Her eyes met with the Adventurer who had helped spread the good word for her and he smiled. “Stay safe out there!” he said, charging back into the action with his sword drawn.

Everyone inspired each other with their successful kills, further strengthening their cohesion as a raid party and giving them the edge over the horde as they dispersed packs of monsters. Arrows whistled through the air, meeting every target Aki set her sights on.

The battle was steadily turning in the human’s favor and Aki was encouraged by the light of hope cracking through the dire tension permeating the Field.

We might be able to win! Maybe we can save the city without Elias. Hope spread through her. *Will he accept me as a fellow party member if we succeed without him? Will he look at me again? Will he say I can be his girlfriend again?*

Aki nocked another arrow as she thought of Elias who she was certain was on his way. When she looked for her next target, she noticed all the monsters in

the sky and on the ground were retreating like the tide.

What's gotten into them?

The other members of the raid shared confused looks as the monsters withdrew mid-battle. It almost seemed as if every monster had agreed to leave at the same time.

Did we successfully repel the monsters? Aki wished that was true, but her heart raced in warning. She held her fist over her chest and strained her eyes in the direction they ran. *Something bad is going to happen. I can feel it.*

As cold sweat dripped down her back, the ground started to shake with loud thuds, sending vibrations up her legs.

She quickly looked for the source and spotted a swaying black shadow plodding toward them from the horizon. With every step it took, the ground shook, and its shape became clearer as it neared.

It was a horned dragon.

Covered with glowing black scales, the huge demi-dragon was capable of trampling several people with just one foot. As if laughing at the humans who were too overwhelmed to make a sound, the demi-dragon approached with its blood-red eyes gleaming brighter than the sun.

Is this for real?!

At last, the demi-dragon had closed the distance and moved its red eyes about the Field, assessing its unmoving prey. Its massive body blocked out the sun, casting a shadow over the area and creating a false night.

I've never seen such a large monster before! Did one of the Field's boss monsters decide to take advantage of the fallen barrier?

Fear spread through the Adventurers and guards who had never fought a boss monster before. The demi-dragon was on a whole different level from the horde they had been fighting before it arrived.

“What the hell is that giant lizard?!”

“We can't beat that!”

Overwhelmed by its mere presence, everyone slowly inched back toward the city walls. But if they retreated, everyone living in the city behind them would be fair game for the demi-dragon. Many people would lose their lives if they let a monster like that inside.

Aki immediately thought of Elias. She was positive he had sensed the danger and was on his way by now. If he hadn't already left for the Dark Lord's Castle, that was. She shook her head to chase away the negativity.

It's all right. He will come. All I have to do is have faith in him and focus on slowing the demi-dragon until he gets here.

Aki watched as some of the guards fled to the city gate. She clenched her teeth and held her ground.

Elias, Leo, and Johann wouldn't run! They would bravely take on any enemy, no matter how strong! Because protecting innocent people comes first.

Aki planted herself in the demi-dragon's path and stared it down.

I might not win. I might lose.

"But...! I won't just be a burden anymore!"

Aki drew an arrow from the quiver on her back and nocked it. She aimed for the demi-dragon's red eye and drew back on the bow.

I can't lose!

Chapter 7: The Hero's Mage **RELIEF** washed over Leo as he watched Elias laughing on the quay under the bright blue sky. *Good, he's back to himself. I planned on telling him to break up with Aki for good if he didn't stop moping soon but hearing him say she's his woman let me know there's no room for me between them. At least now he's finally aware of his true feelings.*

Aki's really something.

Her cheerful perseverance brought down the stubborn steel walls Elias erected around his heart. If not for her, he'd still be trapped following his scripted role in life without ever facing himself and laughing from the bottom of his heart like he was now.

Aki is Elias's hero.

Leo sincerely believed the Lunar Goddess chose Aki as the Hero's Right-hand to support their party on the emotional battlefield more than the physical one. He was ashamed he shallowly assumed he summoned the wrong person at first. After all, it was her straightforward determination and willingness to listen that had attracted him to her. He should've never judged her for her lack of physical strength.

I must've been born under some unlucky star getting stuck encouraging my love rival to get back with the woman I like. But it could be worse. Elias is my best friend, and I've always hoped he would meet a good woman and settle down. His life has been nothing but misery from day one.

Obviously, Leo hadn't expected that good woman to be the same woman he wanted to settle down with, but Elias needed Aki and Aki needed Elias. He got the picture that they made up for what the other lacked.

I want them to be happy together. I'll do anything it takes to make that happen.

“...Thanks, Leo,” Elias said with a genuine smile, taking Leo off guard. He feared Elias had read his mind.

“I h-haven’t done anythin’ worth being thanked for.”

“You have. I was able to accept myself because you laid into me... I was being such a stubborn brat,” Elias muttered.

Leo flicked him in the forehead with his knuckle. “You’ve always sulked like a little kid. Nothin’ new to me. You’d better apologize to Aki sooner rather than later though. Next time you make her cry, I’ll be there to pick up the pieces,” he teased.

“I’ll make a note of it,” Elias responded rather seriously. “I’ll do everything in my power to keep her loving me for the rest of our lives.”

Leo couldn’t help laughing at how intense that sounded. “Aki’s quite the woman to make the highly wanted Hero say that about her! C’mon, let’s head back. Everybody’s waitin’ for you.”

Elias’s green eyes wavered. “Okay,” he said, not hiding his smile.

Leo loved how much Elias cared about his friends. It was because of who Elias was as a person that Leo was willing to put his life on the line for the Hero’s quest.

If Elias wasn’t the current Hero, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to join the Hero Party. I bet I would’ve just remained on at the Academy as a professor and devoted the rest of my life to magic research after graduation.

Thanks to how hard he worked, Leo had graduated at the top of his class and received a direct summons from Kingdom’s king. The king wanted to know if he was interested in joining the Hero’s Party as a Mage.

Of course, it was up to Leo if he wanted to join, and he had every right to decline. With that in mind, he headed to the castle just to satisfy his curiosity about what kind of person was going to save the world from the Dark Lord.

Leo was kneeling in the royal audience chamber anxiously awaiting his arrival when the doors opened and the Hero stepped in. Excited, Leo looked up to find Elias casually strolling over to him without an ounce of nervousness. Elias

immediately struck up a conversation as if they had been old friends all along.

Leo's first impression of Elias was that he was a genuinely nice guy and seemed like the type to easily get tricked out of the shirt on his back if someone pleaded their case to him. He had come there expecting to be overwhelmed by how inhuman the Hero was, but had the rug pulled out from under him with how ordinary Elias came across, for better or worse.

Elias had freakishly perfect looks, but aside from that, he was a normal young man. And so, as they casually chatted, Leo became skeptical that such a good guy would be capable of saving the world without him. Sure, maybe Leo was just being full of himself, but that didn't stop him from thinking the Hero needed him.

When the king pressured him with making a decision about joining the Hero Party, Leo promptly replied, "Please let me serve as the Hero Party's Mage." He instantly regretted making a split-second decision without thinking it through, but when he thought back on it now, he realized he had answered from the heart.

To this day, he clearly remembered the delighted smile Elias gave him when he said, "Thanks, Leo." Elias was probably secretly worried he'd never find party members to join him on the dangerous Hero's journey.

From the moment he first met Elias, Leo had been moved to join his party because of his personality. Now as his friend, he was willing to go the extra mile for him.

That's why I've gotta be the one to help him when he's down on himself. I'll support him when Aki can't. After all, I agreed to be here for him the day I joined the Hero Party.

Leo stood and dusted off his clothes when he suddenly felt as if glass had shattered around them. Nervous tension instantly coursed through his body as his skin crawled.

He looked at Elias with a start. Elias seemed to have also noticed the change in the air, because he was staring up at the sky, his face hard.

I've felt this several times before. It's the sensation I get when the Goddess

Barrier breaks.

The all-powerful Goddess Barrier wasn't flawless and often sustained damage. For that reason, every village and city had guards stationed at all times. However, it wasn't every day that the barrier went down completely, and chaos inevitably ensued when it did.

If the barrier wasn't repaired fast enough, monsters would pour into the city and devour people left and right.

Crap! This is bad.

Nervous sweat trickling down his cheek, Leo turned toward Elias just as a panicked city guard stumbled into the harbor.

"We've got trouble, people!" The guard cupped his hands around his mouth to project his voice. The fishermen, travelers, and shoppers around the wharf looked in his direction to see what was wrong. Once he saw he caught their attention, he took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs. "RUN! Get as far away from the main city gate as possible!"

He repeated that message as he ran through the harbor, earning confused looks.

Leo and Elias looked at each other, nodded, and ran over to the guard together.

The moment the shouting guard took in Elias's attire his eyes widened and he gasped. His guess turned to conviction when Leo stood beside Elias.

"Are you possibly the Hero and his Mage...?" the guard asked, hopeful.

Elias gave a reassuring nod. "Yes, I am. My journey brought me to this city right now. I take it the Goddess Barrier broke?"

Relieved Elias accurately assessed the situation, the guard pressed his hands together in front of his face as if praying to the heavens. "Ooh, praise the Goddess. Thank you for sending us the Hero during our time of need! As you guessed, the Goddess Barrier collapsed just around the main gate and an unbelievable number of monsters are trying to barge in! The city guard, Adventurers, and your Right-hand are currently holding them off, but the horde

is too big...!”

The Hero’s Right-hand? Leo locked onto that one off-handed comment. *That’s...Aki, right?*

The barrier’s failure already had Leo’s heart racing out of control, but the thought of Aki fighting alone made it careen.

Does that mean Aki was out searching for us and happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time when the barrier went down?

Leo imagined Aki struggling to fight off a horde of monsters charging into the city. Possessing the Goddess’s bow didn’t mean she was used to fighting yet. It was too dangerous for her to take on a lot of monsters without backup!

“Let’s hurry, Elias!” Leo grabbed Elias by the shoulders when he looked too dumbfounded to move.

Leo never wanted Aki to be in danger again. He didn’t want to suffer the same regrets and frustration he had over not being there for her in the Ancient Ruins. Elias seemed to agree as he got a hold of himself and calmly placed his hands on the guard’s shoulders.

“I understand the situation. I will head straight to the monsters, so please tell as many people as you can and lead them to a safe place!”

The pale and shaking guard nodded. He seemed rattled by the whole situation.

Elias gave him a second to absorb what he said before squeezing his shoulders. “It will be all right. You have the Hero on your side,” he encouraged with a magnetic smile. “Please don’t panic. I will protect your city.”

The guard fought back his tears and nodded.

Elias is capable of rousing courage in people with a single word, Leo thought as he watched them. That was a sign of the trust and hope the people placed in him.

It was also just one of the many reasons why Leo was proud to be the Hero Party’s Mage. He was currently the only person in the world who could call himself the Hero’s Mage.

Choosing to join the Hero Party in the heat of the moment wasn't a mistake.

"Leo!" Elias turned toward Leo after the guard ran off to continue informing people of the danger. "Send a magic message to Johann! He's the only one capable of restoring the Goddess Barrier."

"You've got it! Though I bet he's already sensed the anomaly and is on his way to do somethin' about it."

It wasn't hard to imagine Johann dashing out of the inn with his staff while complaining "I never have a minute to relax." Louis, Mina, and maybe even Sutcliff, wouldn't be far behind him.

We can leave the inner city to them.

The rest of the Hero Party would eradicate any monsters that snuck inside the city before they could do damage. In which case, Leo and Elias needed to head for the gate fast.

Leo swiped his index finger through the air, quickly drawing up the magic circle. He wiped it away with one hand and a ball of light shot off like a comet in Johann's direction.

"We're good!"

Spell finished, Leo chased after Elias who was already on the run.

Stay safe till we can get to you, Aki...!

Chapter 8: Strongest in the World

“DODGE right!”

“Jump outta the way!”

Aki set her sights on the demi-dragon in front of her while she heard the voices of fellow raid members rise around the Field.

This monster was stronger than anything she had faced before.

Though they worked together to time their attacks, the high-level Adventurers and guards only did enough damage to scratch its scales. Their attacks only infuriated the dragon and did nothing to lessen its forward assault.

Scorching breath spewed out from its ferocious fang-lined mouth, followed by it flapping its wide wings to cause torrential gales to rip across the plains. Even if they managed to evade those attacks, they usually ended up within range of its long serrated tail.

Can we not defeat it at our level?

Losing sight of any possible victory gradually depleted Aki’s ability to stay positive. She thought working with the other Adventurers would be enough to fend off the demi-dragon without Elias.

Throughout the battle her dress had torn, exposing bleeding and bruised skin caked with mud and dust from the several dozen times she had to roll on the ground to escape sharp claws or teeth. The stinging cuts were a painful reminder of how much battle experience she still lacked.

At the start of their skirmish with the demi-dragon, Priests cast heal every time she and the other Adventurers were injured. But as the battle prolonged, injuries skyrocketed, and the Priests ran out of magic. No one could count on being healed now.

This situation proved just how abnormal Leo and Johann were for being able to cast off powerful spells without breaking a sweat. Their presence allowed the Hero Party to blast away monsters in succession and for everyone to be constantly at full health with an endless supply of wide-area heals.

Leo, Johann...you're lifesavers on the battlefield.

She wished they could be there to egg her on to victory. It'd be even better if Elias was standing at the forefront of the battle, his white cloak fluttering behind him as he raised the Holy Sword and flashed a smile that said everything would be okay.

"Elias..." she muttered the name of her beloved as she loosed another arrow and rolled away from the demi-dragon's lashing tail.

Her eardrums shook as the dragon roared in pain.

For a minute, she wished that Elias would gallantly appear on the Field and save her and everyone else from this nightmare. But she bit her lip as she realized her bad habit of relying on him anytime the going got tough was rearing its ugly head again. He was so dependable, she often ran to him rather than handling the problem herself.

I hate just depending on others! She tightened her grip on the bow. *I'll never grow if I seek his help whenever I'm in a pinch!*

Aki glared at the demi-dragon as it tilted its neck back and roared. She swiftly nocked another arrow and aimed for the moment when the large dragon inhaled the air around it to release another fire blast.

Fear stiffened her shoulders and caused her legs to knock together.

The demi-dragon's fire breath was especially lethal as it scorched a wide area in quick succession. Many of her allies in this fight had sustained heavy burns from the ensuing flames.

Her strategy had been to run out of its range whenever she saw it prepping to blow fire again but doing that only caused their raid's chained attacks to lose momentum.

If I want to win this, I can't run from it. Our strategy isn't getting us anywhere. We just need to keep pounding it with chained attacks to disrupt the attack.

Taking careful breaths, Aki bravely held her ground while everyone else scattered around her. Maybe her approach was foolhardy, but attacking and fleeing wasn't accumulating enough damage. They were only tiring themselves

out.

Imagining the single arrow dividing into a rapid-fire attack, Aki targeted the demi-dragon that was close enough to cast a shadow on her.

This will be the blow that takes it down!

“Lady Aki, run away!” one of the Adventurers cried out when they saw Aki squaring off with the demi-dragon.

Maybe it was wiser to retreat with the others. But Aki was sick of running from monsters. Their strategy certainly had flaws, but a piece of her was just fed up with running.

She wanted to put an end to her habit of bolting from her fears and leaving them for someone else to handle.

I don't care how it looks. I want to face my fears head-on.

Aki bit the inside of her cheek to stop from shaking and held her ground. The fleeing Adventurers started to turn back when they noticed her aiming at the demi-dragon.

“Lady Aki...!”

“Hey! We have to turn back!”

Someone started calling out to the others and word passed around the Field until everyone stopped.

The Adventurers returned to surround the demi-dragon with their respective weapons drawn.

“Why?” she asked, her voice cracking.

The banged-up Adventurers flashed reassuring smiles and pounded their fists against their chests.

“If you're gonna fight, we've got your back, Lady Aki!”

“Yeah!” someone else said, not wanting to be outshone. “Running hasn't won us the battle yet!”

“Besides, the Hero might have our heads if we leave his Right-hand to fight alone!” someone else joked.

“That’s a given!” a Mage shouted from behind a Warrior.

Laughter erupted throughout the plains.

Aki swept her gaze over the Adventurers who remained as if she were witnessing an unbelievable miracle. Joyful tears stung her eyes, blurring their fearless smiles.

“Thank you, everyone...!” she said in an emotional, trembling voice. The others nodded and responded in kind.

I can do this. I’m not alone. Just thinking that way empowered her. *I hope I can make Elias think the same someday. He needs to realize that it’s not just the man or woman chosen as Hero who has to fight for this world, but that everyone must become their own kind of hero to protect it together.*

The demi-dragon finished sucking in air for its fire breath and was bringing its neck down to unleash it. Aki signaled the raid party and they sprang into action as one. They all kicked their battle wary bodies into felling the boss.

Aki watched their brave backs racing forward as she aimed for the demi-dragon’s eye and drew back on the arrow. The air exploded around her as the arrow flew in a burst of light toward the dragon’s head. Blinking away the light from her eyes, she heard the beast shriek. Half the creature’s face was carved away, its right eye now gone. Blood fell from its marred face. Emboldened by her success, the adventures cheered in support. Just as she was about to let another arrow fly to finish the beast off— “...Aki!”

A crystal clear voice broke through the din of battle. Her shoulders trembled at the sound of her name.

Knowing exactly who that voice belonged to, Aki slowly glanced over her shoulder as if time had stopped around her. Anticipation sent her heart racing for a different reason from the danger.

Her hopes were met with the sight of dazzling golden hair and clear green eyes running toward her without a sound.

Elias! Elias! Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over. She had been so convinced he had left the city, seeing him felt like a dream. *You came!*

“Elias...!” she cried out in what sounded more like a scream.

Relief softened his hardened features. He didn’t slow down as he called out to the guard keeping an eye on the demi-dragon from the front of the city gate. “Sorry, lend me your sword!”

“Huh? Uhh...?”

Not waiting for the guard to comprehend his request, Elias drew the spare sword hanging from his waist as he passed by. He swung the sword once to get a feel for it and lunged forward.

Distracted by its injury, the demi-dragon seemed to panic as it spread its wings, trying to draw everyone’s attention away from the Hero who had appeared and disappeared like a gust of wind. Just flapping its wings created gales that struck Aki and the others, nearly sweeping them off their feet.

Utterly distracted by Elias’s arrival, Aki quickly dodged a powerful gust of wind and returned her attention to their enemy.

The demi-dragon’s enraged eye locked on her as its cheeks puffed up with the fire breath it was about to unleash.

Shoot!

Aki snapped to it and drew back her bow as the Mages prepared to activate their spells and the Priests cast barriers to protect everyone from the flames. Before they could act, a flash of light came down on the demi-dragon’s head like a comet.

By the time Aki realized the comet was actually Elias’s sword reflecting the thin ray of sunlight shining in behind the towering dragon, his blade had connected with its wing and an earsplitting shriek shook the air.

Before the shriek stopped, the severed wing hit the ground, shaking the area like an earthquake as clouds of dust shot up. That was the moment everyone trembled in awe of the Hero’s overwhelming power.

“One hit...” one of the nearby Warriors muttered in shock.

His shock was warranted—in one fell sweep, Elias had lopped off the dragon’s wing.

No wonder he's the strongest person in the world!

Witnessing the ruthless strength and brilliance of the Hero left everyone speechless.

Elias nimbly landed in front of the flailing, enraged demi-dragon. Its front claw swept down, he jumped on it and into the air over its head. Sword raised, he brought it down on the demi-dragon's scaly back, cutting it from top to bottom.

The glittering blade looked like a ray of light slicing through the monster in a straight line. The demi-dragon let out a death roar as black blood sprayed from its halved body.

The Priests' barrier prevented the Adventurers from being soaked in the bloody downpour.

Elias turned his back on the raid boss without even checking if it was dead as everyone stared at him in mute amazement. He bowed to their ranks.

"I apologize for my late arrival!"

Cheers erupted a moment later.

"It's the Hero!"

"Lord Hero has come for us!"

"We're saved!"

Moved to tears, Aki looked at Elias, a piece of her still unsure he was really there.

His gaze darted away when their eyes met and he shook his head as if to free himself of bad thoughts. He dropped the blood-soaked sword on the ground and held open his arms, a mix of emotion on his face.

"Sorry I'm late, Aki," Elias whispered with a meek smile.

Thrilled he smiled for her and wanting to tell him to never leave her again, she ran to him without caring about how many people were watching. Her feet kicked off the ground at such speed she dove into his arms.

He firmly caught her and wrapped her in his warmth.

Aki buried her face in his chest and pounded her fists against him.

“You’re late...! Do you know how worried I was about you?!” she rattled off faster than her tongue could keep up. Elias chuckled.

“I’m sorry, Aki. It must have been scary fighting alone.”

“Oh, please! I said I was worried about you, not myself! Sure, the demi-dragon scared me, but I was more concerned you had skipped town without me! Don’t think I will let you off easy for—”

Elias lifted her chin and stole her lips before she could finish.



Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. He's kissing me in front of all these people?

"E-Elias! L-Let—" *Let go*, she tried to say and push him away in the brief moment their lips parted to breathe, but her strength was nothing before the strongest man in the world.

It didn't seem smart to reveal the Hero and his Right-hand were romantically involved to a whole crowd of people, but the grinning Hero didn't seem to mind one bit.

Moreover, they only defeated the demi-dragon—monsters still swarmed the skies and Field—it wasn't time to be making out in public.

"Do your job as Hero," Aki nagged, smacking Elias on the butt.

"Get a room, you two!" an exasperated voice berated them. "Monsters are still havin' a party around ya! Don't tell me you're one of those obnoxious couples who only have eyes for each other?"

Aki and Elias looked toward the sharp scolding and found Leo staring at them with his arms folded just outside the gate.

As he lodged his complaints against them, he finished four magic circles in the air. Aki had only ever seen him use both hands to draw and cast two consecutive magic circles. Not only did he have four up this time, but his fingers were swiftly weaving a fifth.

"Looks like I get to see Leo pentacast for the first time in forever," Elias muttered to no one in particular. His delighted tone drew Aki's eyes to his face.

"What's pentacasting?" she asked.

"It's when a Mage uses five different elemental spells at once to wipe out an entire Field. You don't see it used much since it drains the user more than any other casting type. We might get caught up in the blast with the monsters, so we better pull back into the city," Elias explained to Aki, then shouted to the raid members, "Everyone, follow me!"

Ordered by the Hero, every guard and Adventurer still on the Field ran in a beeline for the gate. Elias spoke with such authority no one stopped to question him.

The Hero is meant to lead this world in battle. Maybe that's why he has the qualities that make others want to follow him. Even if he doesn't realize it himself.

"Aki, hold on to me." Elias put his arm under Aki's legs and swept her off her feet.

Their eyes met with her clasped to his chest, and a gentle smile softened his features. Just seeing his smile made her happy enough she could cry. Aki twined her arms around his neck.

With her firmly secured in his arms, Elias powerfully stepped forward and bounded into the air.

Alighting back inside the city walls, they waited beside Leo as a torrent of light began to gather at his feet in sync with his lyrical incantation.

Aki had the best seat to watch as he unleashed the most beautiful magic unlike anything else in the world.

Chapter 9: Praise for the Brave

A dazzling sun suddenly appeared in the darkened sky. Leo waved his hand at the five shining magic circles, causing the growing white ball of light to fall from the sky like an asteroid burning up in the atmosphere.

It emitted such a blinding glow as it slowly descended, it erased the shadows of the monsters swarming the air and land. The entire Field was whited out, and even a person standing one foot away vanished from sight.

Aki clung to Elias's arms, which covered her body to protect her from the flash, and she squinted through the small gap between them.

She saw Leo's side profile right in front of her, his eyes glowing even brighter than the flood of light centering on him. Hair whisked back by the gust of power blowing off the ball of light, he raised his hands to the sky as if summoning rain.

"O light that rules the heavens and earth, I am the one who listens to your plight with the power entrusted to these two hands."

Is that an incantation...?

"...Oh my Goddess, he's using that incantation...?! " one of the Mages nearby cried out in awe.

"I didn't think anyone alive could cast it...!"

Leo's lips curved into a proud smile as surprise spread through the Adventurers. Mina once told Aki that a Lunar Magic spell's strength was determined by how brightly the caster shined during the incantation.

I can barely keep my eyes open, it's so bright! Leo's spell is that strong!

Face brimming with confidence, Leo raised his right hand toward the artificial sun and swept it down toward the ground.

"Burn away the impurities, Goddess's Judgment!" He uttered the last word of the spell as if his voice commanded all the magic in the world, "Descend!"

Just as his imposing voice echoed through the Field, the ball of light that outshone the sun burst as though someone shot off fireworks. Innumerable

arrows of light rained down like stair-rods.

W-Wow!

Aki watched the beautiful light show with her hand resting on Elias's arm.

Curiously enough, the arrows accurately targeted only monsters and seemed to move around the humans as though they had a mind of their own.

Was there not even time for the monsters to shriek in agony? The moment they were struck by the light, they turned to charcoal as if burned by a fire, instantly turning to ash that was carried off by the wind.

The arrow downpour quickly dispelled the monsters, and the sky gradually cleared as if a storm had passed. Flowers glittered in the sunlight falling from the clear sky, and the shimmering remnants of the spell danced like fog, creating a fantastic scene.

Leo stared at the last vestiges of the hailing light with his lips pressed into a hard line and his jaw locked. With such a strong spell active, he couldn't let his thoughts wander or become distracted for even a second.

Everyone present gaped as if they were witnessing a miracle in the works when at last the shining mist vanished.

True silence had returned to the Field that was now clear of monsters, and the plains outside the gate were so calm it felt surreal.

"H-Hell yeah....!" someone whooped, starting a wave of excited victory poses and cheers.

"We did it!"

"We won!"

"AWESOME!"

Guards and Adventurers alike hugged, high-fived, and celebrated in various ways as tension gave way to excitement.

Surrounded by their enthusiasm, it finally dawned on Aki that they had protected the city from hundreds, if not thousands, of monsters.

We did it! We did it! She was moved to tears.

“You did good holding them off, Aki.” Elias placed his big hand on her head. She looked up—his dazzling smile was within touching distance. It was almost as if they had gone back to the days before the trouble at the ruins.

Aki roughly rubbed the tears from her eyes and hugged him tightly. “Thank you. Thank you so much for coming, Elias...!”

“...Anytime. Actually, I’m the one who should be saying thank you. I said such horrible things to you, but you still believed in me and worked as my Right-hand. Thank you.” Elias scratched his cheek with an expression that was both apologetic and bashful.

Aki closed her eyes and softly shook her head.

She was hurt by what he said that morning, but after thinking about it calmly, that was him sharing his true, unfiltered feelings with her.

She was happy he confided in her without pretense. After all, she knew he only shed his Hero persona and let out his weaker human side with a select few people he trusted.

They shared a small smile as if to make up for all the hurt of that morning. Then Aki let go of Elias and turned toward Leo.

Leo had helped them out a lot—again. Without him, Elias might not have recovered from his depression or been able to work up the nerve to face Aki. And most of all, his magic had instantly cleared the Field of danger.

“Leo! Thank—”

Leo pivoted forward as she was trying to thank him.

“Leo!”

She wasn’t sure if it was her or Elias who called his name first. Aki dashed over and supported Leo from below before he could hit the ground. Elias also put his arm around Leo’s opposite shoulder to hold him up.

“...Sorry, Elias, Aki...” Leo muttered, exhausted, as he leaned on Elias. He pressed his eyes shut for a few moments before partially opening them and glancing around as if he couldn’t focus.

Aki placed one hand on his back and one on his chest to better support him

on her side as she shook her head. “Don’t apologize! You were awesome, Leo! I’ve never seen more beautiful magic in my life...!”

Wrapped in a veil of light, Leo had looked like an angel sent to earth to take on the Dark Lord.

Leo peered down at her face and grinned like a rogue. “Just how awesome was I, Aki?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “You were so awesome, I couldn’t take my eyes off you!”

Leo is so cool, kind, and strong. He always looks out for us.

“Thank you for everything,” she said in a teary voice.

He placed his free hand on her head and tousled her hair.



“Don’t cry. You’re such a crybaby... I’m just glad...you’re all right...” he mumbled, sweat dripping down his chin. His eyes slid shut as if he had said all he needed.

Worried, Aki shook him. “Leo? Don’t pass out!”

“Don’t waste your breath on him. You know how resilient he is,” a blunt yet kind voice said behind Aki and Elias. They turned toward the speaker. Aki was so happy to see him, she covered her mouth. “Now then, can everyone who is no longer useful stand back? It is time for us to work.”

There stood Johann with his silver, cross-shaped staff, flanked on either side by Mina and Louis, with Sutcliff trailing behind them in a robe that hid his inhuman appearance.

Johann pushed his silver bangs off his face and flashed a peerless smile at Aki. “Thank you for holding off the monsters before they could do irreparable damage. You performed your duties as the Hero’s Right-hand flawlessly.”

“Thank you!” Aki was thrilled to receive a comment from the boy who rarely praised anyone.

Mina elbowed him in the side and teased, “So you *can* say some encouraging things once in a while!” Then she waved to Aki. “Are you all right? Whoa! Your dress is a mess! How dare the demi-dragon hurt my precious Aki! I’ll bury it!”

“True, I have no idea where to look with how torn your dress is. Mina, it looks like Elias and Leo already took revenge on the demi-dragon, so why don’t you find something to cover her up?” Louis suggested, placing a hand on Mina’s shoulder.

Hearing that, Sutcliff reached down and tore a long strip off the hem of his robe. He respectfully carried it over to Aki and draped it over her shoulders. “Sorry it’s not much, but use this for now, m’lady.”

“Thanks! It helps. Did you come to help out too, Sutcliff?”

“You betcha. I’ll always be there to help m’lady out of a crisis. I’m not the strongest Shadow Tribe member out there, but figured I could be of some assistance.” He flashed his pearly white fangs and winked through the opening

in his robe.

Sutcliff is always so modest.

Aki knew just how strong he was after taking on that quest with him.

“Don’t be modest,” she huffed, puffing out her cheeks.

Sutcliff shrugged with a laugh and turned toward Elias who was cautiously watching him interact with Aki. “Please allow me to beg your forgiveness for what transpired during the quest. I know what I did can’t be undone with an apology, but I greatly regret it and have gratefully received forgiveness from Lady Aki, Master Leo, Clarence, and the others. You don’t have to forgive me too, but I hope you will allow me to work alongside your party to atone for my crimes.” He shut his eyes and bowed down at a ninety-degree angle. “Please.”

He looked prepared to let Elias run a sword through him.

Elias silently assessed him for what felt like a long time before offering a strained smile. “...Please lift your head, Sutcliff.”

“Hero Elias...”

“I won’t sugarcoat my anger for you harming Aki, my friends, and even myself with your actions. But...” Elias paused, placing his hand over his heart and continuing in a calm voice, “some of the fault lies with me for lacking as a Hero and as a person. And I have no interest in returning the hurt you caused with even greater hurt. So...” He held out his hand. “Please devote yourself to protecting my friends and the world. I will put my trust in you. Don’t fight to repent, but as our fellow party member.”

Elias smiled and added, “I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

Sutcliff blinked at him, his eyes watering, and grabbed Elias’s hand with both of his.

“Th-Thanks a bunch...! Man, you’re such a good guy, I could cry! So this is the Goddess sent Hero, huh? How can anyone be your enemy?” he rambled cheerfully, smacking his knees as he straightened up. His optimistic expression suddenly turned stern as he placed his right hand over his heart and swore an oath of loyalty. “I, Sutcliff Jent, hereby pledge my power to the Hero, unworthy

as I am. Obviously, my protection extends to m'lady as well! Leave her to me!"

Sutcliff reached out to touch Aki's cheek, but Elias sullenly slapped away his hand.

"Just so you know, I'm fine with you protecting Aki, but she is...she is my woman, so you can't have her."

"Sure, sure. I get the picture, heroboy! You don't have to beat around the bush about it."

"Sutcliff!" Elias growled, turning redder than a tomato.

Sutcliff was already on board with teasing Elias.

Elias and Sutcliff seem like they might actually get along great.

The Hero and Shadow Tribe were typically enemies, but if they joined hands, there were likely few people who could stand against them.

"Welcome to the team, Sutcliff," Aki said, smacking him and Elias on the back as they squabbled.

They both cried out "That hurt!" and shared a laugh.

"...Thank you for accepting him, Elias," Johann said, walking over now that things looked settled. "I don't think I have mentioned this yet, but Sutcliff is actually a fellow Priest of mine at Sanctuary. I'm sorry someone I know caused you such heartache."

Johann casually confessed a huge secret.

Huh? Sutcliff...is a Priest?

"Wait, why is someone from the Shadow Tribe working for Sanctuary...?"

Sanctuary backed the Hero, while the Shadow Tribe backed the Dark Lord. They weren't exactly on friendly terms.

Before Aki could question them further, Sutcliff shouted so loud she couldn't hear herself. "Aaaaaaaaah! Just think of it as part of the confidential mission the Dark Lord sent me on!"

"I haven't heard about that. Is there something I need to know?" Elias asked, looking to Johann for answers.

Johann coolly averted his gaze. "It's essentially what it sounds like. I have a personal connection with Sutcliff and my position has made me privy to his mission, but not even my father the Pope is aware someone from the Shadow Tribe has infiltrated Sanctuary. Please take this secret to the grave."

In other words, Johann not only realized Sutcliff was sent by the Dark Lord to spy on Sanctuary but decided to overlook it and make sure no one else found out. From the sound of it, he may have even gone to extra lengths to make it easier for Sutcliff to get around on the inside.

Knowing Johann, he probably did that because he believed it was necessary for the betterment of Sanctuary.

One wrong move and Johann could have faced execution for assisting the Shadow Tribe, but he still lent Sutcliff a hand. Essentially, he had dipped his toes into working with both Sanctuary and the Dark Lord's side. It was easy to imagine how he would be torn between two conflicting sides.

"...Oh boy, I close my eyes for a few seconds and I learn about all sorts of baggage you're carrying, Johann," Leo interjected, cracking open an eye to look at him.

"I am simply fulfilling my duty as the current Pope's son and Hero Elias's Priest by availing myself to the truth of the world. I believe this is an essential trial for me as someone who will someday lead Sanctuary, and something only I can do. I will see through the path I believe is right, even if it means threatening my current status or becoming my father's enemy," Johann stated with conviction, a refreshed smile softening his hard face.

The future of Sanctuary was in good hands if someone with such strong convictions became the next Pope. It was the Hero Party's job to support him in his endeavors to make that possible.

"You can do it, Johann! Let me know if you ever need any help!" Aki exclaimed, clenching her free hand. His expression visibly soured.

"No, thank you. Please focus on helping yourself. Don't do anything at all. Otherwise, you might cause more problems for me."

"H-Hey! That's rude!" she retorted.

“Just kidding,” he responded with a heart-stopping smile. His ability to switch between the whip and candy was really something. “On another note, that was some marvelous pentacasting, Leo.”

Leo’s lips curled in a weak but proud grin. “Thanks. Your turn now. Tie everything up in a pretty package, Johann.”

“I accept the challenge. Louis, Sutcliff, if you please.”

Beckoned, Sutcliff and Louis fell into step behind Johann who made his way to the gate. They stood an equal distance apart from the damaged barrier.

Everyone watched their backs with bated breath.

“...What are they about to do, Elias?” Aki asked, still supporting Leo with him.

“They are going to repair the city’s Goddess Barrier,” he answered, his eyes trained on them. “Only high-level Priests can borrow the great amount of the Goddess’s power necessary for doing repairs. Johann is one of the best out there, so there’s no one more apt than him for the job.”

“Louis and Sutcliff are going to share their magic, so Johann can really focus,” Leo explained. “Johann’s still human, repairing a barrier of this size by himself is backbreaking work... Dammit! I wanna help too! Let go of me, you two!”

“H-Hey! You’re in no shape for that!”

Leo shrugged Aki and Elias’s arms off and staggered toward the others.

Sparing no effort for his companions was one of the amazing things about Leo, but it became problematic when he forgot to take care of himself in the process.

Leo tends to push himself to the brink, so we have to stop him before he goes too far!

Aki smacked Leo on the back of the head as he argued with Elias to let him pass. “Stop that, Leo! Your work ethic is extremely attractive, but I’m not fond of the way you make us worry by overexerting yourself.”

“Not fond of...me...?”

Taking secret delight in the shock that flashed across his face, Aki doubled

down on him. “That’s right. We have a party to make sure no single person has to bear the burden alone. And our party isn’t just here to help Elias—we support each other equally. So this is the part where you leave the rest to Johann, Louis, and Sutcliff, and recover your energy. If you help out and end up passing out, you’ll make me feel like I failed you as a friend. Get it?”

Leo’s cheeks turned pink as he looked away from her smile and nodded once.

Seeing Leo suddenly behave, Elias scratched his cheek and muttered, “Neither of us is any match for Aki...”

“Hello, everyone,” Johann addressed the Adventurers crowded around the gate. “I am Johann Clarence, a Priest with Hero Elias’s Party. I am about to repair the Goddess Barrier, so please keep your eyes peeled for any new monsters that might infiltrate before I’m finished. Mina, I’m counting on you.”

“Roger that. I’m your girl for the job!” Mina replied and glided over to Elias and Aki. “Would you two mind helping me fend off any monsters that might come while the boys are casting the spell? Having another short-range attacker like Elias and a long-range Archer like Aki will increase the odds in our favor. Take care of what you can!” She winked at them.

Although Leo had wiped out all the monsters on the Field, there was a high chance of more spawning and attacking before the barrier was finished.

Aki and Elias shared a look and nodded.

“Sure! Elias, go with Mina. I’ve got Leo. I can fight from here.” Aki pointed to the bow and quiver resting on her shoulder. She could shoot down monsters from well behind Johann.

“Sounds like a plan! You’re with me then, Elias!” Mina waved Elias over and dashed out through the gate and into the open plains. They were going to fight off the monsters before they could get near the city.

Aki had but one job: taking out the aerial enemies. Pumped for a fight, her view was filled with her friends defending the outer gate and those chanting inside the walls. Just their presence changed the battlefield; such was the Hero Party.

Johann held his cross-shaped staff horizontally, signaling he was starting.

Silence immediately fell over them, and the Goddess's splendor dominated the space. He began to weave the first words of the spell in a crystal clear, dignified voice.

"O Creation Goddess."

At the same time that Johann's voice, which still had some boyish charm, shook the air, a magic circle fanned open on the ground beneath him. It spread like wildfire, forming a huge magic circle that spanned the entire city.

Louis and Sutcliff spread their legs about the width of their shoulders and extended their hands forward to support his spell.

A torrent of silver light flowed into the lines of the circle as if someone was carefully pouring a bucket of water onto it. It spread to every corner in the blink of an eye. The dazzling silver light emitting from their feet enveloped the houses, vegetation, and people without distinction.

"So pretty..." Aki murmured.

"Solar Magic is the prettiest hands down," Leo said, looking up at the sky with her. "Once you learn Lunar Magic there's no learning Solar, so I always have to look on with envy."

He stared at the silver light piercing the sky with yearning.

Oh yeah, you have to choose either Lunar or Solar Magic. You can't learn both.

To Aki, Leo's Lunar spells were gorgeous enough, but just like how the grass always looks greener on the other side, perhaps so too did magic you couldn't use.

Aki returned her attention out the open gate. Flashes of silver glinted in the distance as monsters let out death cries. Elias and Mina were fighting off a new wave of monsters.

Now's the time for my notebook to come in handy!

She pulled the notebook from her pocket and flipped it open. Knowing what she wanted, the blank pages turned into a map revealing where the monsters were. Several dozen red dots quickly appeared on the page, and on closer inspection, several of them were closing in on the city from above.

My turn!

Ready for battle, Aki helped Leo sit on the ground and removed her arm from his shoulder.

“I’m going to provide aerial support. Check out my archery skills!” She hopped to her feet and slid the bow off her shoulder.

“Can you do it?” He looked at her with one eyebrow raised. Then he grinned and let her show off what she was made of without another word.

Aki held the bow in front of her, pulled her leg back, drew an arrow from the quiver on her back, and nocked it. Then she aimed in the direction she saw the monsters on the map.

Hit them!

When she loosed the arrow with that prayer, it became a thin beam of light that cut through the sky in a straight line, separated in the air, and transformed into several balls of light. It flew with precision toward the monsters in the sky and mercilessly pierced their torsos.

Several agonized shrieks shook the air before their corpses plummeted upside down.

Woohoo! It worked!

Aki heard Leo whistling behind her as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

“That was awesome, Aki! You’re now capable of wide-area attacks. Pretty good skill coming from a klutz like you!”

“You should have left out that last comment! Though I think the wide-area attack doesn’t do as much damage.”

She sensed her damage output decrease whenever she targeted several monsters at once.

The way she saw it, if her overall damage output was ten, then she did ten damage to a single target, and that number decreased with each additional target. In short, she would only do one damage if she targeted ten monsters with the same arrow.

Guess I have to increase my level if I want to do more damage. The stronger I get, the more useful I will be.

Just as Elias, Mina, and Aki finished defeating their respective enemies, Johann twirled his staff and thrust it powerfully into the ground as he continued chanting. He raised his face to the heavens as if imploring the Goddess for aid.

“Please wrap us in your protective embrace, for that is where it is safest!”

At the same time as his voice sublimated, Louis and Sutcliff swept their hands in the air to release the magic they built up. A flash of silver burst from the magic circle covering the city.

Aki caught sight of Elias and Mina jumping inside the closing barrier just as she was shutting her eyes against the blinding light. They had timed their return with the barrier’s reactivation.

The light was so bright it seemed to burn right through her tightly shut eyelids. Aki threw her arm over her eyes until the intensity weakened and the stinging stopped. Then she cautiously squinted at the jaw-dropping, divine scene unfolding around her.

Walls of light rose from the outer rim of the multifaceted magic circle and arched over the city like a dome. The translucent barrier was reminiscent of what the surface of a lake looked like from underwater.

The glassy barrier flashed once to signal its completion before the light abated and it became invisible to the naked eye. At the same time, the glowing mist dispersed, and the magic circle taking up the entirety of the square disappeared.

“...Success,” Leo exclaimed behind Aki as Johann thrust his staff into the ground and turned back to face them.

“Thank you all for your assistance. The Goddess Barrier has been fully repaired.”

Delighted cheers and cries rose from the raid party as Johann inflamed them with a glowing smile.

“We did it!”

“Hurray!”

“Thank the Goddess!”

Adventurers and guards alike high-fived, jumped with joy, broke down crying, and boasted. As everyone expressed their joy in different ways, Elias watched with a gallant smile, Mina stretched and grinned, Louis fixed his hair, Sutcliff smirked with his hand on his hip, and Johann shrugged with a look of relief.

“Ups-a-daisy,” Leo said with vigor as he shoved to his feet and put his hand on Aki’s shoulder. “Let’s join them, Aki.” He flashed a roguish grin and staggered toward Johann, waving.

It’s finally over! A sense of accomplishment and relief filled her as she watched his broad back go toward a waving Elias. She dashed over to them, beaming.

“You all did great!”

Chapter 10: A Dream Worth Pursuing

AFTER everyone worked together to save the city, Aki and the rest of the Hero Party had to run various errands with no time to celebrate each other's achievements on the battlefield.

First, Elias and Louis split up to search Port City for any potential holes or weaknesses in the barrier. Meanwhile, Johann headed straight to Sanctuary's local church to report on the events of the day, while Leo pushed his tired body to do the same at the Academy's Port City Guild Branch.

Since Aki wasn't affiliated with anything, she was put in charge of reporting to the Adventurers' Guild with Mina and was currently sitting in a meeting with the local guildmaster.

"Gahaha! What a story! I heard of your heroic deeds from the young guild members who joined the raid. Thanks for protecting our city!" the guildmaster exclaimed, his voice booming through the guild house as he whacked Aki and Mina on the back.

This guy is intense!

This was Aki's first time meeting the middle-aged guildmaster with a scraggly, gray beard. After smacking the girls on the back, he kicked back in his leather chair, crossed his muscular legs on the table of his private office, and raised a mug of beer in his bearlike hand.

His intimidating appearance and cheerful laughter gave the impression he was a fatherly guildmaster capable of uniting the gruffer Adventurers and commanding respect. He exuded an aura of charisma that naturally drew people to him.

"I worked hard too, Guildmaster! I played a pretty big role in protecting the city!"

"Ooh, I heard you earned your keep too, little Mina. I'm proud to be your guildmaster."

They seemed to be on good terms as the guildmaster ruffled Mina's hair

when she circled the table to claim credit. He freed her from his noogie and looked up at her with affectionate eyes.

“Let me congratulate you once more for joining the Hero Party. You became an Adventurer because you wanted to be a hero in your own right, yah? I’m proud beyond words to have watched you grow from the girl I picked up in the slums to the woman who has achieved her dreams. Your hard work has paid off in so many ways,” he said emotionally.

Mina’s eyes misted. “...Thank you,” she murmured.

Hearing a little about Mina’s past made Aki realize she knew next to nothing about her friend’s background. She didn’t believe in prying into people’s pasts until they felt comfortable bringing it up themselves, but she had just learned a bit about her without meaning to.

If the slums here are anything like my world, then Mina has likely lived through a lot of hardship...

Aki’s heart stung a bit as Mina smiled at the guildmaster, feeling as if she had just glimpsed a fragment of the darkness her always cheerful and kind friend kept buried.

WITH their report to the guildmaster over, the girls walked through the shopping district on their way back to the inn.

Sensing the reason for Aki’s silence ever since they left the guild, Mina forced a sad smile. “...I’m sorry, Aki. I wheedled my way into your party without really talking about myself...”

“D-Don’t be sorry! Your past doesn’t bother me. I was just stupidly getting worried about how much suffering you might have gone through until now...” Aki faltered, not sure exactly what kind of hardship someone who grew up in the slums and then became an Adventurer might experience.

But Aki hoped that whatever Mina’s past may have entailed, she was able to find happiness in being a part of the Hero Party. After all, Aki enjoyed every moment she spent with her dear friend.

“...What I am trying to say is that if you ever need someone to talk to about anything at all, I’m here for you. I might not be able to do anything for you, but I care about you a lot. Haha, kind of embarrassing to say that out loud!” Aki giggled to hide her embarrassment. Mina suddenly stopped. “What’s wrong?”

Aki turned around a few steps in front of Mina. She was looking down at her hands with her lips pressed in a flat line as if enduring some pain. Before long, a single tear rolled down her cheek. Mina quickly batted it away with the back of her hand.

“S-Sorry! I just got so emotional! You heard Guildmaster back there. I’m an orphan who doesn’t even know her parents’ faces. I’d been living in this city’s slums for as long as I can remember. It was a struggle just to find food every day... My sole enjoyment in life was reading *The Hero’s Tale* picture book that I found in a pile of rubbish.”

Mina explained how *The Hero’s Tale* was a collection of epics about the generations of Heroes written by Minstrels in simple terms for everyone to understand. Reading that picture book was the one sliver of hope and entertainment Mina had living in the streets.

Latching on to those tales, Mina came to idealize the Hero and strove to become an Adventurer so she could join the current generation’s on his journey. She really just wanted to be needed and loved as a member of the Hero Party as those were two things lacking from her parentless life.

“...Money is needed to become an Adventurer, so I took on any manual labor job that came my way to save up, but then...a friend from the slums stole it all. I stopped trusting people after that and became desperate enough to steal... I even took on jobs involving threatening people... I was on a one-track road to becoming a full-time criminal, and things just kept getting worse from there,” Mina slowly retold her life story as if the words were being ripped from her.

“Going through life like that, I started thinking I wouldn’t mind dying...and that’s when Port City’s Adventurers’ Guild decided to purge the slums. Seems like they got an official request from the capital. When the current Guildmaster and his army of Adventurers swept through the slums, I didn’t resist because I honestly didn’t care what happened to me anymore. I think I just crouched in

some back alley and watched with deadened eyes...”

Lost in the past she spoke of, Mina’s normally lively, bright eyes were shadowed and brimmed with loneliness. It was almost as if the orphan girl persona she had shut away decided to be present during this conversation.

“It was the guildmaster who found me there. He actually tried to talk to me and asked, ‘Why the long face? Not gonna run for it?’ When I told him I have nowhere to run, he noticed *The Hero’s Tale* sticking out of my pochette and asked if I liked the story. That question reminded me of all the hard work I had put in before taking the wrong path, and I just broke down crying with it clasped to my chest,” she said with a small laugh at the little girl she had been.

“He ended up sitting down and hearing me out. He listened to how I wanted to be an Adventurer, got betrayed by a friend, and ended up becoming a stereotypical slum waif. Thinking back on it now, I never told anyone else my story before him, but there was something about Guildmaster that led me to believe he would understand me. I think I just wanted an adult somewhere to speak to me as a human being and not just some street rat...” Mina gave a sheepish laugh.

“After hearing me out, he told me to come with him if I have nowhere better to go and promised to help me become an Adventurer capable of achieving my dream of joining the Hero Party.” She smiled at the memory of it. That seemed to be her one good memory amid the heartache.

“So that’s how I ended up training under him and picking the Thief class since it just meshed well with my past. I was super motivated and leveled up with every quest I could get my hands on... But I was never able to forget the betrayal I experienced in the slums, so I party hopped and soloed. I was scared of trusting and being betrayed again.”

Sympathizing with her, Aki hung her head. Mina strode right past her and turned around to face her with an optimistic smile.

“But my opinion changed when I met you. When I first brought up that Quest put out by Sutcliff with you, you didn’t doubt me for a second and even invited me to join you. You made me so happy, trusting me without question. I feel like that helped remind me how important it is to trust people.” Mina folded her

hands behind her back and leaned forward with a grin.

“How do I put it? Even if you weren’t a part of Hero Elias’s Party, I’d still want to be in the same party as you. Adventuring together seems like so much fun. You made me think if I’m gonna try trusting someone, I’d want that someone to be you, Aki. Simply put, you have become a huge piece of my life! Oh gosh, it’s embarrassing saying it like this!” she laughed merrily, covering her mouth with one hand as her cheeks flushed.

...I didn’t know Mina trusted and cared about me that much. Or that I had changed her life.

“And just as I was on cloud nine about teaming up with you, I found out that Elias was the current Hero!” Mina said in an exaggerated tone, holding both hands up and shrugging. “At that point, I was positive our meeting was fate! I mean, how many people obtain their dreams and a best friend at the same time? That’s why I...” She ran toward Aki with open arms and jump-hugged her.

“Whoa!” Aki cried, barely catching her balance. Mina’s blissful smile was inches from her face.

“Love you so much! My love is just as great as Elias and Leo’s! So please let me continue to support and protect you. There’s so much you have to carry along with Elias—I want to lessen that load even just a little for you.”

Aki was starting to get teary-eyed and wrapped her arms around Mina’s neck. “Thank you, Mina! With you by my side, I can get over any hurdle with a smile. So, um, if you don’t mind, let’s stay friends forever!”

Since coming to this world, Aki had Elias, Leo, and Johann to keep her company, but it was nice to have a girlfriend she could talk to about everything, especially the things she didn’t want to tell the boys.

I’m also really glad to have met Mina. The Hero’s journey is filled with peril, so I need to get strong enough to protect her as well. I want to be the type of friends who protect and support each other. Having friends in two different worlds is pretty neat!

“...So, now that we’re friends, I have something to confide in you...” Mina mumbled, letting go of Aki and looking away from her face.

“What is it?” Aki asked, excited for some girl talk.

Turning pink up to her ears, Mina pressed her fingers together. “Y-You see, during the Quest...um...a bunch of stuff happened...and I sorta realized I have feelings for someone...”

“Whaaaaaaaat?!” Aki squealed. She already guessed Mina had a crush on someone and who that person might be, but hearing it from her added another level of excitement. Or more like there was only one person who could have caught her fancy during the Quest.

But as they say, speak of the devil and he will come—before Mina got a chance to get out what she wanted to say, a certain man greeted them behind her.

“Aki, Mina! What are you ladies doing over here?” he asked in the sonorous voice of a Minstrel.

Mina’s shoulders jumped and she turned scarlet, giving away what she hadn’t yet confided.

Yep, my hunch was right on the mark, Aki thought.

“Hi, Louis! Finished inspecting the barrier?” Aki asked the man she believed to be Mina’s object of affection.

Louis brushed his platinum bangs off his face and flashed a confident smile. “Yes. Though it’s out of the question for a barrier created by Johann, Sutcliff, and myself to have any flaws, it never hurts to check.”

His narcissism never failed to be on at all times, but he had the skills to back up his claims, so it was harder to find fault in his bragging.

As he casually closed the distance between them, Mina remained frozen solid with her back to him.

Yep, she couldn’t be any more obvious.

“By the way, I have a special favor to ask of you ladies.”

“Eeek! Wh-Whatever might that beeeeeee?!” Mina leaped into the air when he stood beside her and rested his hand on her shoulder. She ran and hid behind Aki faster than a lizard losing its tail to escape a predator.

She was entirely acting the part of a girl in love, and it was irresistibly adorable.

Louis cocked his head and raised an eyebrow, confused by her flight. “Is something the matter, Mina?”

Aki elbowed him in the side for his oblivious question.

Did he really not notice the change in her behavior despite flirting so hard with her from day one? Louis was surprisingly dense for a flirt.

It's so frustrating to watch!

Mina turned an obvious shade of crimson and poked her head out from behind Aki's back, tears misting her eyes. She spoke without looking at him. “N-Nothing's the matter. Anyway, what do you want from us?”

Aki had to stop herself from laughing at Mina's unnaturally standoffish reaction.

Louis, on the other hand, looked more perplexed by the second. “Right. Some of the Adventurers are forming teams to patrol the Field,” he answered. “I was appointed leader of a team and wanted you two to join me. Are you both free?”

According to Louis, the barrier breakdown fiasco caused an abnormal number of monsters to flock to the city, and their raid had wiped out several dozen waves, so now they had to prepare for the possibility that there might be irregular monster spawning or powerful boss monsters drawn to the area. Therefore, Adventurers were going to patrol the vicinity to be sure they weren't caught off guard.

“We just finished giving our report to the guild, so we're free to help. Is anyone else from the Hero Party coming?” Mina asked.

Louis shook his head. “No, the plan is just for you, me, and Aki to go on patrol. The others can't do it.”

“Oh, really?” Mina asked, seeming surprised they wouldn't prioritize monster extermination.

“Well, in Elias's case, just walking the Field will draw monsters to him, so the Adventurers rejected his help,” Louis said with a laugh. “Sutcliff is hanging out

at the inn with Elias because we thought it would be better for him to not linger around humans.”

Huh. So Elias is monster bait.

Aki easily imagined Elias eagerly offering to help and getting depressed when every Adventurer shot him down. Who knew even the beloved, all-powerful Hero faced rejection too.

“I just ran into Leo on the way here, but he looked pretty sick. So I told him to rest at the inn too. I’m surprised he’s even able to walk around after pentacasting without preparation like that. Especially after still being fatigued from the ruins...” Louis said pensively and then fell quiet.

So pentacasting is draining even for a Mage at Leo’s level?

“Say, Louis, is pentacasting all that amazing?” Aki asked without much thought. “Even from your perspective as a magic user?”

It was a type of Lunar Magic capable of instantly annihilating monsters in the sky and on the ground. Aki was deeply impressed by it as a non-magic user, but she wasn’t sure how impressive or rare that was in this world.

Louis shared a look with Mina and carefully picked his words. “...Honestly speaking, amazing can’t even begin to sum up what he did. Perhaps saying his ability is out of this world? God-class? No, neither of those fit either.” He shook his head and looked into her eyes with grave seriousness. “...Aki, I’ll be frank, that was inhuman.”

“Inhuman...?” She shuddered from his choice of words. She sensed he wasn’t complimenting Leo, but speaking in fear of him.

Mina seemed to be of the same opinion as she said nothing, her cheeks taut.

Louis quietly went on to explain, “Pentacasting light magic falls under the forbidden arts for Lunar Magic users.”

Forbidden arts: they weren’t forbidden in the sense of being banned, but rather activating such a spell cost a dangerous amount of magic power from the caster that risked death, so several Mages were required to work together as a group to use them.

For Lunar Magic users, the greater the magic power they expended for a spell, the more lethal its damage output, and the larger burden it put on their health. Any spells considered dangerous to the caster were labeled forbidden arts, and such arts were avoided unless the situation was dire.

“...They can’t ban the forbidden arts because there aren’t even that many people capable of using them. There are plenty of Mages who believed the forbidden arts are just something you learn about in textbooks and don’t really exist. Leo activated one such legendary art alone, and with practiced ease... Frankly, his power is beyond human understanding.” Louis paused and narrowed his eyes on Aki. “Who is Leo, really? Is he truly...human?”

“Excuse me?” she asked back, not expecting that question.

What else could he be?

“We know that he is a descendant of Lenard Gaines, one of the revolutionaries of the Creation Era. Going by the ancient texts I have read, Lenard laid the foundation for the Lunar Magic used today. It makes sense that his descendant would be blessed with a greater talent for magic than a normal person. However, Lenard should have been human, so his relation to Leo doesn’t explain why Leo possesses a magic supply far beyond human understanding. My guess is that there is more to Leo than his lineage.” Louis stopped speaking there, letting his words sink in.

Aki vaguely nodded along and dropped her gaze to the cobblestone.

She knew nothing about Leo’s background beyond him being chosen as the Hero Party’s Mage because he graduated at the top of his class. It made her wonder where and how he had lived as a child before entering the Academy. Leo didn’t seem to know he was Lenard Gaines’s descendant. Not even Johann knew.

The only person with that knowledge was Sutcliff who had entrusted Leo with the Holy Dagger. In other words, Sutcliff might be the one with all the answers.

Mina clapped her hands together, breaking the somber mood. “Well, it’s not like ruminating about it here will get us anywhere, right? He might not know the answers himself, but I say ask Leo. Or maybe you’ll have better luck asking the Dark Lord directly when we visit his castle. For now, our time is better spent

patrolling the area around Port City and letting the boys recover before heading out.”

“True enough. I’m sorry for bringing up a serious topic in the middle of town,” Louis said with a small smile.

“You always end up so stuck in your head you fail to move forward,” Mina said, clapping him on the back.

The assertive Mina and the thoughtful Louis actually made a surprisingly good combination.

“I agree with Mina,” Aki said, brushing her hair behind her ear. “We might find the answers faster if we ask the Dark Lord rather than making rash assumptions about Leo.”

“Speaking of the boys,” Mina started to change the topic, “if the other three are resting at the inn, where is Johann at?”

“He will likely be embroiled in questioning at the church until nightfall,” Louis answered, giving his head a sympathetic shake. “Managing the Goddess Barriers falls under Sanctuary’s duties, so the local division probably has a lot to discuss and plan for future failures. Worst-case scenario, he won’t be back until after we are all long asleep.”

“I see... No one has any time to rest, do they?”

Johann had to be tired after repairing the city-wide barrier but likely didn’t have room to complain. In the same sense, Louis also had to be exhausted after assisting him, but he was charged with taking a team out to patrol for monsters. Every member of the Hero Party was in such high demand, they rarely had a moment to themselves.

“That makes sense. Then we’d better do twice as good at our job to make up for their absence!” Mina spun around and winked.

Nodding, Aki placed her hand on her chin and became lost in thought.

Since none of the boys are participating in Field Patrol, won’t it give Mina some good alone time with Louis if I don’t go with them either? I don’t know how many people are supposed to be on a team, but this will give them time

together.

She was also worried about Leo's condition after hearing about the forbidden arts. That was a good enough reason for her to bow out. Now was the time for her to help Mina's romance as a friend.

"OH NO!" Aki cried out as if she had just remembered something important. She smacked her hands together and put a hand to her head.

Startled, Mina and Louis turned toward her. "Whoa, Aki, what's wrong?"

"U-Um, you see, I just remembered that Elias asked me to go shopping...!" she answered with a little too much gusto.

"Shopping?" Louis puzzled his brow and looked at Mina. "Oh, maybe he wanted you to buy Leo a magic recovery potion? That potion is quick-acting, so it may be able to alleviate the peculiar malaise that occurs when magic is exhausted."

He seemed convinced by his complex reasoning, so Aki nodded and said, "Yep, yep! That's the one!"

It's time for the third-wheel to roll off and leave the lovebirds alone!

"I'm off to the item shop to buy the potion, then I'll head back to the inn to give it to him! Have a good time on patrol, you two!" Aki circled behind Mina and gave her back a shove. She lurched forward and fell into Louis's chest.

"Whoa! Hey, Aki! Where'd this sudden burst of energy come from?!" Mina glared over her shoulder, her cheeks bright red.

Aki cupped her hand over her mouth and flashed a suggestive smile. "May you have luck on various battlefields! You have my full support!" she teased.

That was enough for Mina to guess Aki was trying to come up with a random reason to leave her alone with Louis. Her red-faced glare only sharpened. From Aki's point of view, that expression was the height of adorable.

Before Mina could get a word in edgewise, Aki quickly said, "Sorry, Louis! Look after her for me" and dashed from the square.

I always thought that Mina and Louis would make a good couple. Mina had finally become aware of her feelings, but the real question was how Louis felt about her. *Now that I think about it, Louis is really hard to get a read on.*

Aki headed straight to the inn on the outskirts of the city as her thoughts traveled a meddlesome course.

“I’m back!”

She threw the front door open and was welcomed by the lyrical jingle of the doorbell and the savory scent of a warm meal. It smelled like the innkeeper and his hired chef were in the middle of cooking dinner for their guests.

Drawn by the mouthwatering aroma, she headed to the dining area with an open kitchen and was stunned by what she found there.

“Oh, hi Aki. You’re back just in time. I made a lot to eat. Would you like some?”

“Boss Lady! Welcome back!”

Standing in the kitchen flipping omelets in a frying pan with masterful technique was the current Hero—Elias. Beside him Sutcliff chopped up vegetables at the speed of light, sending the pink apron he must’ve borrowed from the innkeeper’s wife fluttering with the wind his speedy knife skills created.

D-Did I just step into another dimension?!

Flabbergasted, Aki approached the kitchen where dozens of dishes had been laid out on fancy silver trays on top of the nearest dining table. At a glance, she made out a whole roasted chicken on a bed of herbs, smoked cheese, stew poured on top of baked salmon, sweet apples boiled in syrup, bite-sized, honey-soaked cookies, and countless other professional-looking dishes that fed the eyes and roused hunger.

“W-Wow...”

Did Elias and Sutcliff make all of this together? Aki was floored by the unexpected reveal that they were both genius cooks. *I’m not so great at cooking... Or more like, I suck at it. I feel like my role as one of the party’s only*

women is in jeopardy... I better start practicing soon.

Elias definitely looked like he had maxed out his cooking level as well. Catching up to his culinary level seemed as if it would be as impossible as matching his Adventurer level.

As she stared aghast at the feast, Elias approached her and held out a silver tray with a single cup on top. "Sorry to ask this of you when you just got back, but can you take this to Leo? I think he's resting on the second floor."

"Sure. How's he doing?" she asked, looking down at the contents of the cup. Caramel-colored black tea swirled inside, smelling of milk and honey. The occasional billows of steam coming off the top suggested it was just the right temperature to warm up the body.

"He seemed okay to me, but he staggered upstairs saying he's going to nap and hasn't been down since. He might be sound asleep, and if he is, you can just leave the cup and come back down without waking him."

"Okay." Aki accepted the tray from Elias and he returned to his station at the kitchen counter beside Sutcliff. She looked at the finished dishes as he resumed cooking and asked, "That's a lot of food you're making! Is this supposed to be for dinner tonight?"

"You betcha! We decided to throw a party tonight to celebrate successfully protecting the city. Hero Elias and I were both free, so we're in charge of food. Once you finish checking in on Leo, give us a hand, okay?"

"Eep! E-Er, if I have the time..." she replied vaguely to Sutcliff and quickly ascended the stairs.

She had nothing against helping out, but she was positive her assistance would turn the food to charcoal... And she didn't want to experience disappointing Elias that way.

Cooking should be left to the pros! I'll find another way to help out. Coming up with excuses to get out of helping, Aki started getting excited about the night's festivities. There hadn't been an opportunity for their current party to enjoy themselves over a group meal. She hoped Leo would be energized and Johann would get home in time for them to all partake.

Aki stopped in front of Leo's door and knocked with her free hand. "Leo, are you up?"

Chapter 11: The Recluse's Apprentice **NO** one answered the knock at the door.

Is he sleeping?

Aki slowly pulled open the door, trying not to wake him, and peeked inside. Shafts of afternoon sunlight spilled into the room from the window on the other side, casting an orange glow on the ceiling, support beams, and wood floor. A single bed with a bulge under its thick quilt sat directly in front of the window. The bulge was likely Leo curled up under the blankets.

Aki tiptoed to the bed, careful not to step on any squeaky floorboards. There she found him asleep with the simple cotton quilt pulled up to his chin and tightly tucked around him.

I'm glad he was able to sleep for several hours.

Relieved, she set down the tray on the side table. She'd been fraught with worry that the room would be empty as it was when she went to check on Elias, but unlike the Hero, Leo rested without a fuss.

Aki carried the wooden chair resting against the wall over to the bed and softly sat on it. As she listened to Leo's peaceful breathing and the lapping waves outside, Louis's last comment plagued her thoughts.

"Who is Leo, really? Is he truly...human?"

She had never wondered who Leo was. To her, he was one of the first people she met in this world, he was dependable like an older brother despite his penchant for teasing, he was quick-witted, better at magic than anyone, and the man who proclaimed his love for her.

Leo was an irreplaceable person in her life. And not just to her, he was the unsung hero of their group that everyone cared about.

It just seemed so obvious for him to always be there the way he was, that it never occurred to Aki to consider his background.

What exactly was he doing up until he attended the Academy?

"...That you, Aki?" Leo's purple eyes opened. They were too tired to focus yet.

She accidentally woke him up.

Leaning forward, Aki studied his sleepy face. “Good morning, Leo. How are you feeling?”

He answered her with a lazy smile. “Could be worse. It’s not half bad waking up to your face.”

“Good for you, you’re well enough to flirt,” Aki retorted to hide her shyness, then rested her palm on his forehead. It didn’t feel unusually hot. He seemed fever free.

His complexion had gone from a worrying blue to a healthy pink after his nap. He seemed well on his way to recovery and would be fine as long as he rested up.

Exhaling her relief, Aki sat back on her chair. Leo rolled on to his side and searched her face. “What’s Elias and the gang up to?”

“Um...” Aki put her index finger to her chin as she recalled what the others were doing. “Elias and Sutcliff said they’re throwing a party for everyone tonight. They’re going all-out making dinner downstairs. Johann is still at the church making his report, and Mina and Louis are out patrolling the nearby Field.”

“Patrolling the Field? Ah, are they checking for abnormal spawns?”

“Yep. Adventurers broke into teams to scour the area for any unusual activity. Louis was assigned as one of the team leaders,” she added.

Leo let out a vexed groan. “I see. I would’ve loved to join him if I was feeling better. I’m gonna get rusty staying cooped up in bed like this.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re too strong to get a little rusty with a day’s rest. By the way, I have a cup of tea that Elias brewed for you. Want it?”

“Oh, I do, I do!” Leo sat up, swung his feet over the side of the bed, and sat on the edge.

Aki fetched the cup of tea from the side table. She presented it to him with both hands. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. Knowing Elias, it’s probably sugar water. Or tea swimming in honey.

His tea is always deathly sweet.” Contrary to his complaints, Leo happily carried the cup to his lips.

Everyone knew for a fact that Leo had a sweet tooth. Elias likely made his tea sickeningly sweet knowing it would cheer him up. That unspoken kindness made Leo happy. The two of them were really good friends.

Aki observed Leo as he sipped the tea and relaxed. *Is this my chance to ask about his upbringing?*

Where was he born? What was his childhood like? What kind of teen years brought him to join up with Elias?

Those were the questions she wanted to ask, even though knowing didn’t change anything in particular. She was just curious about him, especially after Louis questioned his humanity.

Finding it odd that Aki was silently assessing him, Leo tilted his head. “What’s up, Aki? Something on your mind?”

Ugh, he’s sharp...

It was an exercise in futility to try to pull the wool over his eyes. Trying to get by with an “It’s nothing” would only end in him hounding her until she spilled her guts anyway.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for the longest time,” she started. Noticing the change in her demeanor, he schooled his expression and waited for her to continue. She looked into his almond-shaped violet eyes and cut to the chase. “What was your life like before you met us? Where did you grow up? How did you live? I’m curious to know more about you...”

She heard about how Elias and Johann grew up and attended school in Sanctuary, but she never heard anything about what Leo did before attending Academy.

Leo scratched the back of his head looking as if he wasn’t sure how to answer. “...It’s not like I was hiding it or anything, but I guess I haven’t told you much about myself. Sorry about that.”

“D-Don’t be sorry! I’m who’s sorry for prying. You don’t have to get into it if

you don't want to!"

Judging by the awkward expression frozen on his face, it seemed like a topic he didn't want to touch on. Aki shrunk down in her chair and hung her head in shame for overstepping.

There was a light clang as Leo placed his cup on top of the tray. "Naw, I don't mind talking about it, but it's more like there's nothing *to* talk about."

What does that mean?

"...Long story short, I'm missing memories of my childhood. You could say I have partial amnesia."

Aki sharply sucked in her breath at his unexpected confession.

She never imagined he had trauma like that given his cheerful and caring personality. She always assumed he came from a big, happy family.

Leo gave her a considerate smile when she didn't respond. "It's not as big of a deal as full-blown amnesia. I just can't remember my youngest years, where I was born, or who my parents were. My memories start from when I was already living with Gramps."

"Gramps?" she repeated.

"Yup! He was my magic teacher!" Leo explained, beaming at her as he spoke of a father figure he cared a lot about. "Gramps took me in when I was three and taught me everything I know about magic until the day I entered Academy's magic school."

A smile naturally spread across Aki's face as she listened to him talk about his Gramps like a young boy bragging about his father or grandfather. It sounded like his magic teacher had filled both a fatherly and an educational role in his life. Maybe it was through his influence that Leo had such a jovial personality and was capable of getting along with everyone.

"Gramps is an amazing Mage, but he's got one eccentric personality. He basically became immersed in his magic research to the point of losing interest in the rest of the world," Leo continued. "He built a small cabin deep in the woods and lives like a recluse. I ended up living at his hermitage training seven

days a week without ever interacting with the outside world...”

“Th-That’s quite the upbringing. Thanks for sharing.” Aki shoved her hand in front of her face, stopping him because she knew if she heard more about his time with his gramps, she’d worry. Plus, what he already told her seemed to be answer enough for why he was a magic genius.

In any event, she learned he had an unusual childhood.

Louis was hinting Leo might not be human, but being raised and trained by a recluse for over ten years seemed like it would shape anyone differently from children who grew up in normal families.

“...Skipping all the other details, I attended the Academy’s magic school from when I turned twelve until my graduation at twenty-two. And right after graduation, I was scouted for the Hero Party.”

“I see.” Aki gave a deep nod, convinced by his story.

He grew up in an environment that wasn’t *too* strange, though it may be hard to say it was normal, except for the memory loss. But who remembered before they were three anyway?

If there was ever an opportunity for it, she hoped she could meet the Gramps he respected so much. *How much of an eccentric—er, unique Mage is he?*

Leo stood as if to draw the conversation to close, and stretched. “Anyway, that’s it for my life story. Nothing to worry about, is there? It’s your turn to tell me about how you grew up.” He lightly patted her on the head and chuckled while heading for the door.

Oh yeah, I’ve never spoken to any of them about my life before coming here. How will they react when they hear about my world?

Just imagining their reactions was entertaining as she followed Leo out of the room.

Chapter 12: The Hero's Protectors **THAT** night, Aki's wish came true: everyone was able to gather together at the inn in time to throw a grand party. The party took place around the large wooden table in the middle of the dining room, which they had rented for the night. Mountains of food wobbled unsteadily on top of the dozens of plates and bowls shoved together on the table.

Sitting at the table with everyone else, Aki served herself from several of the closest plates. She started with the corn chowder, the oil and butter baked salmon, and a soft roll with lavender butter kneaded into it.

Did Elias and Sutcliff really make all of this in just a day?

She glanced at Elias sitting beside her. Dressed casually in a white shirt and black slacks, he gracefully cut the roast beef with a silver fork and knife.

He's cool even when he eats...

Aki realized she was a lost cause when she thought him wonderful in even the most menial of tasks.

As for Elias, he didn't even notice her as he chatted away with Leo and Johann sitting across from him. They seemed to be enjoying their conversation as they sat forward and spoke with their hands as much as they did their mouths. Their laughter livened up the room.

After everything they had gone through, Aki was grateful they could enjoy each other's company once again.

When Elias said they should break up, she thought the world had ended and became trapped by the idea she would never see him again.

Suddenly recalling the sadness, she grabbed his cuff under the table, wanting to make sure he was really there. Feeling the light tug on his sleeve, he turned

toward her with an endearing smile.

“What’s wrong, Aki? Can’t reach a dish? Want me to get it for you?” he asked, seemingly thinking she was pestering him for a dish that was out of reach.

Sheesh. He still doesn’t have a clue.

Part of her wanted to stomp on his foot, but she was just too happy he was acting like himself again that she lightly bumped against his shoulder without answering.

THE party continued in high spirits until most of the food was gone, and that’s when Elias looked at each person seated at the table and formally spoke over the din.

“Sorry to interrupt the fun, but I have something I must apologize to you all for...” he started, nervously lowering his gaze.

Everyone put down their forks, halted their respective conversations, and turned their attention on him. They knew what he wanted to say. After all, they had all been patiently waiting for him to sort out his feelings.

No one held anything against him, and Elias likely knew that, but being the way he was, he probably needed to officially apologize to put the past behind him.

Elias sucked in a small breath and bowed. “I’m really sorry for acting out...!” He raised his head, encouraged by the table’s silence. “...I failed to suppress my feelings during the Ancient Ruin Quest and lost control of my powers as a result... I ended up hurting you all when you tried to help me, too. As someone who has held to being the ideal Hero all his life, I felt having people I cared about this close to me had become my greatest weakness...and I arbitrarily decided I shouldn’t stay with you any longer.”

With each quiet word that slowly left his lips, Aki’s heart throbbed. Elias’s tone conveyed just how much he battled with himself to come to that painful decision. Everyone else had embittered and hurt expressions as they listened.

After a brief pause, Elias continued, sorting his thoughts and feelings as he

went, “The closer a person is to me, the more I’ll hurt them. Those I want to care for and protect are in the greatest danger. If that is the curse placed on the Hero, then I...thought it best to remain alone from now on, no matter what obstacles lay ahead. I believed that was the best option to keep people—and myself—from getting hurt.”

Aki squeezed her hands on her lap until they turned white. Elias had tried to protect everyone from the dangers he and his journey possessed by pushing them away. But that only put him back into the isolation he feared most.

It was my responsibility as his girlfriend and secretary to protect him from loneliness. Aki chewed her lip, frustrated for failing him.

“...So I got it in my head to go to the Dark Lord’s Castle without you,” Elias confessed, closing his eyes against the heartache of that decision. “I thought if the Dark Lord really wants a truce, then everything would work out if I went alone. I didn’t have any sound proof. I was just letting my arrogance guide me. I figured even if I ended up fighting him and dying in the process, that would still save the world, so it’d all work out, in the end, either way...”

He said each word haltingly as if they were lodged in his throat.

Elias was raised to believe the only way for him to save the world was to fight the Dark Lord. However, dying in the process could save the world just as much as killing the Dark Lord would. How painful it must have been to be touted as a hero by the people of this world, while they secretly desired his death just as much.

But no one could change places with him. The moment he was born as the Hero, Elias’s destiny was set in stone. Thus, he clenched his teeth and strove to be the best hero possible, all the while his mental state decayed. Being the Hero was his meaning for living. Put another way, he had no other way to live, for the Goddess created him solely for that purpose.

What a miserable task the Hero was charged with!

As everyone remained silent, it was Johann who slammed his hand on the table. He had listened to Elias with the calmest expression of the lot.

“...Good grief, what am I to do with you? I believe the real problem here is

this world's messed up system that forces either the Hero or the Dark Lord into defeating the other. The Goddess is quite sick in the head, using the two of you, who she birthed like her own children, as tools," Johann hissed, barely stifling his simmering anger.

Elias blinked as if to make sure he was really looking at Johann, and everyone else stared on slack-jawed.

No one expected they would see the day when Johann would speak emotionally. Normally, he approached everything with detached calm and an even voice.

Ignoring their rude stares, Johann continued his tirade. "I care about you a lot as a friend, Elias...and it is my hope that you live for a long time. I want to protect you. Therefore, I will not allow you to hasten your death. To stop you from doing anything stupid, I am going to watch you like a hawk from now on," he rattled off, sheepishly clearing his throat along the way.

In other words, he was declaring his intention to stick with Elias through thick and thin. Framing his concern in a cross manner was so like Johann, Aki giggled behind her hand.

Everyone else seemed to feel the same, as the tension melted away and peals of laughter filled the room. Johann blushed, not expecting to be laughed at, and shrugged when he realized they weren't going to stop anytime soon.

Surrounded by an all-around brighter mood, Aki reflected on what Johann said. He was right. Rather than become depressed by the fate Elias shouldered and fall into the same pitfalls with him, it was their job as his friends to redirect him when he started down the wrong path.

Elias had a bad habit of immediately choosing to sacrifice himself, so he needed them to protect him from becoming a lone, injured wolf.

After enjoying a roaring laugh until his eyes teared up, Leo threw in his two cents. "Man, oh, man is Johann on the mark this time! Face it, buddy. You couldn't have done anything about the Ancient Ruin Quest rampage incident or the failed Goddess Barrier with your strength alone. Your power might be beyond comprehension, but you're being conceited if you think you can solve every problem in the world."

Leo punctuated his harsh words with an amused smile and leaned across the table to flick Elias in the forehead.

Louis nodded beside Leo as he tilted back his wine-filled goblet. “In the end, it’s just too dangerous to leave the Hero alone. We have to stick to Elias like flies in honey until the end of our days, or else he might do something reckless again. I hope you don’t mind being stuck with us, Elias!”

“I’m prepared to follow you to the ends of the world,” Mina chimed in, leaning her elbows on the table. “Even if you want to get rid of me, I’ll be hot on your tail!”

“Lucky Heroboy, so loved by your friends,” Sutcliff said with a wide grin. “It’s thanks to that big heart of yours that I’m able to enjoy this feast with good company. I’ll be sure to return the favor.” He reverently bowed his head.

Aki sucked in as much air as her lungs allowed and raised her voice. “M-Me too! Even if you dump me and tell me not to follow you, I’ll still do it! I’ll always be by your side, never letting go of your hand!”

Rushing out that confession, she grabbed Elias’s free hand with both of hers and held it to her chest. She wanted to make sure his hand never slipped free of hers again. Even if he tried to shake her off again, she planned to stand her ground and latch back on without giving up.

It took only a second after she spoke in the heat of the moment for Aki to realize how bold she had been, and embarrassment sent butterflies aflutter in her stomach.

Oops, I did it again!

Red splotched Elias’s cheeks as well, and he tried to hide it by covering his face with the opposite hand. That gesture only further revealed just how bashful he was.

Becoming more embarrassed by the second, Aki quickly let go of him and tried to pull away, but his big hand caught hers before they could escape. Surprised, she looked up at him, but his gaze was directed to the rest of the table.

“Thank you all for fighting alongside someone like me. I always thought being

stronger and better than everyone meant I could protect everything all by myself. But I finally learned how wrong my thinking was after I lost control and had to be stopped by you.”

He paused to take a breath.

“There is so much I want to protect and must protect. But I can’t protect everything with my measly power alone. For me to do it all, I would like to request your assistance. And in the process, I hope you will protect me as well.”

Joy washed over Aki as she witnessed Elias openly asking for help.

This was the first time he acknowledged his weakness and chose to rely on his friends to fill in what he lacked. Aki saw this as the moment where the man who spent every second of every day trying to be the strongest, finally coming to accept his humanity.

Everyone answered with warm smiles and nods.

Elias took another breath, stood, and bowed to the table. “Please continue to be a part of my party and my life.”

Chapter 13: On the Balcony Under the Moonlight **WITH** permission from the innkeeper, the Hero Party rented a separate room for each party member, giving everyone their own space for one night.

Aki had changed into the long nightgown she borrowed from Mina and was absently staring up at the wood ceiling from the bed next to the wall.

Elias had returned to his senses, putting their group back on course, Sutcliff of the Shadow Tribe had joined their party, and now they were ready to finally head to the Dark Lord's Castle. Surely Nako, who had disappeared in Aki's absence, and Dark Lord Kerdes would be waiting for them.

Aki hoped, and suspected, this meeting with the Dark Lord was going to be full of answers about the Goddess powers she and Nako unknowingly harbored, along with the truths hidden in the *Book of Creation*. She had a hunch once she understood the origins of this world, all the riddles and mysteries would string together in a coherent picture.

Once everything was clear and they did what they had to...would Aki return to her original world with Nako? Would she just go back to her everyday life as if nothing happened?

Back to being a boring old office worker with nothing interesting going on? Was that what she wanted?

Will I never be able to see everyone...see Elias, again? I mean, I won't have a reason to be in this world once my duty as the Hero's Right-hand ends.

The thought gnawed at her. She rested her head on the lumpy pillow and stared at a stain on the ceiling to escape reality. It didn't work.

Will I be forced apart from everyone I care about? I won't get another chance to be with them? Aki covered her face with her hands. *I don't...I don't want that to happen! I wish this journey would continue forever. It doesn't have to end.*

She shook her head from side to side, her cheeks smacking the pillow. Those were dangerous thoughts. She rolled off the bed onto her feet.

Being alone at night depressed her. Getting into a fight with Elias and battling off monsters had fatigued her physically and mentally.

“...I need some fresh air.”

Seeking calm, Aki's feet carried her to the window where gentle moonlight shined in.

When she opened the cozy, floral curtains, the dark sea and the inky night sky dotted with glittering stars spread across the horizon. The window exited onto a balcony with a handrail.

Enjoying the night breeze might help cheer me up.

Mind made up, she unbolted the latch, slid open the double window, and stepped out under the night sky. Her ears were immediately greeted by the sound of lapping waves. The sea breeze tousled her hair and brought the smell of salt to tickle her nose.

“So nice...”

Captivated by the peaceful night view, she stretched her arms overhead and walked up to the railing. She placed her hands on it and leaned forward. Orange lights glittered in the direction of the city square. They seemed to be holding some kind of night market.

She had seen hundreds of stalls lining the central square in the afternoon, so the area seemed lively night or day. When she thought of how they protected the locals' everyday life, she was glad she stuck it out and fought off the monsters.

Granted, it wasn't her efforts alone, but that of the group that made it possible. Elias slew the dragon, Leo wiped out the monsters with a fireworks display of magic, and Johann repaired the barrier.

They are all so amazing. When will I become as strong as them?

Things might be very different if she did a better job of drawing on the Lunar Goddess's powers. She rested her chin on her hand on top of the railing and sighed.

“Can't sleep, Aki?” a familiar voice asked from above.

Startled, she craned her neck back. She spotted Elias's face on top of the roof. "E-Elias? What are you doing up there?"

"Hi," he greeted, waving down at her. Against the moonlight, his blond hair looked silver. His lips quirked into a playful smile. "Good evening."

"G-Good evening—don't dodge my question!" Aki pounded on the railing. "Why are you there? It's dangerous! Come down here! Sheesh." She pouted.

"It's not dangerous for me," he said, stating the obvious.

"M-Maybe not, but it makes me anxious seeing you up there. Get down! Right now!"

He always does things his way, Aki thought, cradling her head in her hand. She slapped the top of the railing several times to urge him down.

Laughing, he slipped down from the rooftop and onto Aki's balcony with catlike reflexes.

He's more agile than a cat. I wish I had one percent of his agility.

He was dressed casually with his top shirt button undone, while Aki was dressed for bed in Mina's white cotton nightgown. Meeting under the stars at this hour, in these clothes, sent her heart rollicking.

Her eyes traveled from his moonlit profile to his slightly exposed chest, and she quickly looked away before her eyes lingered too long.

Calm down. Calm down... I mean, why does Elias have so much more sex appeal than I do? Aki's shoulders slumped.

Elias leaned against the railing and pushed the bangs off his handsome face. "...I just couldn't fall asleep after everything that happened today. So I decided to get some air first." He flashed her the smile of a prankster who found someone to tease.

Oh? Am I the only one whose heart is pounding over our nighttime rendezvous? Displeased by that possibility, Aki narrowed her eyes on him and shot back a terse response.

"Heh. Are you so pent up you have to climb onto the roof to get some air? You never cease to amaze me," she huffed, placing a hand on her hip.

Elias let out a deep, rumbling laugh. “Sorry, sorry. I wasn’t trying to scare you. I thought I could see more stars from the roof, and most of all, I was trying to see if you might come out onto the balcony.”

“Why...?” She tilted her head.

He scratched his cheek as he usually did when it was awkward. “...Because I wanted to apologize to you properly. I said some really horrible stuff to you during the afternoon.”

True enough, their breakup made her so sad she cried her eyes out. But they already made up, and she felt the fight actually made them grow closer than before, so it didn’t bother her anymore.

Wanting to make sure he understood, Aki looked into his eyes and lightly shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m over it. Besides, I feel like I’m the one who needs to apologize. This whole ordeal started because I couldn’t protect myself and failed to support you as your girlfriend and your secretary. You haven’t done anything wrong, Elias.” She gave him a half-smile and shrugged. Returning his gaze, she inhaled and bowed. “I’m sorry as well. I admit started to think you had come to hate me though.” She straightened up and smiled bashfully. “So thank you for coming back to me! I love you, Eli—”

Before she could finish, Elias grabbed her arm and pulled her against his broad chest. Her face collided with his pecks, and she blinked several times trying to figure out what happened as his arms wrapped around her back.

“Whoa! Um, Elias?”

“...Me too,” he whispered in her ear, holding Aki so tight to him he was sure she wouldn’t get away. “I also thought that you...had come to hate me. I was scared to death of that. After all, I said and did things deserving of your hatred.”

“Elias...”

His shoulders trembled, and Aki put her hands around his back, returning his embrace.



It was a relief to know he also struggled with the thought of her hating him. Put another way, it meant his affection for her hadn't changed because of their fight. They were so similar, fearing they would lose the other forever, it was almost comedic.

Sharing an intimate hug, they enjoyed each other's warmth and stayed comfortable despite the cool night air.

Relieved to have her so close, Elias softened his hold on Aki. He looked down at her face and pressed his forehead against hers.

"So, Aki, please...from now on..." His lips quirked up in an imploring grin. "...Please continue to love me."

Chapter 14: Departure

MORNING came after a well-deserved restful sleep. Johann joined the rest of the party in the inn's lobby where they gathered to discuss the journey ahead. Everyone had their packed bags and travel attire on. They had previously decided to split up the workload and tackle different destinations separately. The lobby brimmed with excitement as everyone was pumped about their respective missions.

"So let me remind everyone of the information one last time before we go," Aki said, pressing the ball of her pen against her chin as she read off the notes she took as the Hero's Secretary. "Elias, Leo, Johann, and I are traveling as a group to the Advanced Nations of Academia, where Leo is from, to use Nako's mirror to quick travel to the Dark Lord's Castle."

She looked to Leo who put his hand on his hip and nodded. "Right."

The Dark Lord's Castle existed on a remote island far from the mainland. The only way to get there was by long-distance quick travel, which was rarely used, making it a dangerous undertaking. Any spells involving teleportation or transference used more magic the greater the distance.

For that reason, teleporting to the Dark Lord's Castle carried the risk of appearing at ridiculous coordinates if attempted without utmost precision. One small mistake and they might fall upside down into the middle of the ocean. There was no shortage of stories about botched attempts where people ended up in the oddest locations.

As a measure to increase the probability of success, they decided to rely on the Academy Leo graduated from, and do it in the room dedicated to transference magic located in the magic school.

According to Leo, the room was equipped with many different magic items to increase magical power and supply, and since the school had skilled Mages working as teachers, their assistance would also improve their odds of success.

Deciding to quick travel to the castle by means of the Academy, Elias's primary party of four set their coordinates for the Advanced Nations of

Academia.

“And it’s our job to head to Kingdom’s Royal Library, right?” Louis said, holding the *Book of Creation* in one hand and sharing a look with Mina beside him.

Written in the ancient script of the Creation Era, the *Book of Creation* couldn’t be read unless it was deciphered into modern language, so Louis, who was versed in the ancient script, and Mina, who understood more than the rest, were to buckle down in Kingdom’s Royal library and begin the decoding process.

The contents of the book couldn’t be exposed, so Louis was stuck with the unthankful job of translating it without assistance.

Johann stole a look at Louis who was chatting away with Mina over a page. He heard Louis was from a noble family, but it still begged the question of why he was so well-versed in the ancient script that could only be studied by a select group of people. His knowledge put other scholars to shame.

Was his experience wandering the world as a Minstrel really enough to gain the kind of knowledge necessary for a translator?

I doubt Louis is just any Minstrel. There is more to him, as there is to me. I’m certain he has his reasons for traveling with the Hero, and I personally believe we should question him before it is too late, but...from what I have seen of his character, he doesn’t seem to be a bad person.

If anything, the way he handles tough situations with contemplative calm and the grace with which he carries himself makes me think he is of a much higher station than even I originally assumed.

Johann really wanted to dig into Louis’s background, but he realized remaining on good terms with him was currently to Elias’s advantage, and decided to leave him be for now.

Sutcliff, their other mysterious new member, had returned to the Dark Lord’s Castle first thing in the morning before anyone was up. Only a letter expressing his apologies and thanks was left behind. He was responsible for quite a bit of heartache, but it resulted in huge strides for the Hero Party.

He could have chosen a better way of going about it though... Johann thought.

“Okay, guys, I guess this is goodbye for now,” Mina said, her eyes growing watery. Catching her drift, Aki sadly looked down to stop the tears. Mina threw her arms around her. “Be careful not to get hurt while I’m away, okay, Aki? Don’t get depressed if Elias says something contrary or if Leo asks the impossible or Johann gets sarcastic with you!”

“Contrary...” Elias muttered.

Leo burst out laughing, and Johann just shrugged.

What is she saying? I have never been sarcastic with Aki.

Once girl time was over, Elias clapped his hands, drawing everyone’s attention.

“All right, we each have separate missions to attend to, but we are still members of the Hero Party. If you run into any trouble, make sure to contact another party member immediately, whether through magic or a letter. Let’s make sure we are there for each other,” he declared with an electrifying smile that brightened everyone’s faces and got enthusiastic replies in return.

Hearing that from the man who tried to do everything by himself until yesterday was really encouraging.

The group left the lobby with Elias in the lead, and they exited under the endless blue sky. The radiant sunlight unique to Port City was so dazzling it stung the eyes. The cries of seagulls crossing the sky seemed to be calls of farewell to see them off on the next leg of their journey.

Elias, who was bordered in gold by the sunlight, looked back at his party falling in step behind him. Then, with a confident and radiant smile worthy of the Hero, he said, “Till we next meet, I wish you luck.”

“**SO** I’m stuck with just you lot again...?” Johann sighed as he fixed his vestment’s cuff outside Port City. He looked at the people he was to travel with again: Elias was doing squats to warm-up for potential monster encounters, Leo was yawning and stretching like a lazy cat, and Aki was fidgeting as she still

wasn't used to the Field yet.

...Why does this give me a bad case of déjà vu? It reminded him of the first day he set out on the Field with them.

Perhaps the reason it felt like a lifetime had passed since then was because they had each overcome a variety of personal obstacles that left lasting scars.

Leo stopped doing breathing exercises and flashed them a lopsided grin. "Feels like we're back at the starting point with this group."

"It was our first party line up," Elias said, smiling with his hand resting on the Holy Sword's pommel.

The biggest change from when they first began their journey and now was that everyone had learned hidden truths about each other and the world. A greater understanding of the world gave them new objectives to pursue.

Even I have changed from the person who was just supposed to be spying on Elias, Johann thought, reflecting on his own growth. *Now I am traveling with him as a true member of his party. It's so freeing.*

"How long will it take to arrive at the Advanced Nations of Academia?" Aki asked, cupping her hand over her eyes as she looked out at the never-ending plains.

"Good question. Probably a couple of weeks by foot," Leo answered.

"A c-couple of weeks? Ugh." Aki blanched.

Realizing Leo was teasing her, Johann glared at him and took control of the conversation. "Leo, that wasn't very nice. It will indeed take several weeks if we walk there with our own two feet. However, we are in no position to aimlessly waste time, so we will be borrowing help from Leo's partner."

"Leo's partner... Oh!" Aki clapped her hands together. "You mean Milsheep!"

"That's the one," Leo confirmed.

Indeed, crossing the Field in a decent amount of time was best done on the back of a summon beast. Quick traveling was actually the best method, but since they were going to need large amounts of magic to teleport to the Dark Lord's Castle, they had to reserve their supply.

Milsheep's feet should cover the distance in a few days, and the danger was minimal at their level.

"Stand back." Leo gestured with his hands and pulled out his small Grimoire. He rested it on his palm, and it magically opened to the correct page. He closed his eyes, held out his hand, and began drawing the summon circle in the air. "Can you hear my voice calling out to you? Answer me, my contracted friend. Cross the skies to come for me."

An amused grin lit his face as he held open his hand and an adorable POP cracked the air, followed by a puff of white smoke.

Wind swept away the billowing smoke and returned the scenery to normal, leaving behind a dazed little lamb anxiously looking around with big, round black eyes. As soon as it located its master it let out an adorable bleat.

Summon beasts are cute...

Johann was relatively bad with animals, but he was envious of the pure, loving adoration the little creature gave Leo. Solar Magic was incapable of summoning, so his longing grew even stronger.

Milsheep transformed into her giant form without delay and the boys leaped onto her back with familiar ease.

"You guys good to go?" Leo, who had taken up position at the front of Milsheep, looked back at the rest, his hands sinking into her wool. Even the way each member told him they were ready was like a throwback to their first day out adventuring.

Once he confirmed everyone was seated, Leo swung his hand down in the direction of the plains sprawling into the distance.

"In that case, the Hero Party is departing! Onwards to adventure!"



Afterword

THANK you for waiting for this volume! It's a pleasure to greet new and old fans here. I'm the author, Tsukasa Yamazaki, and I am pleased to present you with *I Became the Secretary of a Hero Volume 3*!

What did you think of the Barrier Arc covered in this volume?

After returning from the Ancient Ruins and the events of Volume 2, each member of the Hero Party must come to terms with their respective issues with the help of their friends, allowing them to set out on a brand new journey.

This volume was an especially pivotal growth arc for Elias.

In the previous volume, he sustained a traumatic mental blow after nearly taking the lives of the very friends and lover he swore to protect because he let the Goddess take over his mind. This is extra hard on him because he views himself as the protector of the world, not someone who hurts others for his gain.

Learning the truth of what he did filled him with fear that this unfathomable power would someday cause him to destroy everyone he holds dear. This is what leads him to separate from his friends to save them from himself.

It's Leo, Elias's best friend and love rival, who's the unsung hero of this arc for getting Elias out of his funk!

Even though he has made his feelings for Aki clear, he still mediates between her and Elias to help them make up, and he even wipes out the horde of monsters that attack Port City with a single, powerful spell. Leo saved the day on both the mental and the physical battlefronts!

In future volumes, his mysterious origin story and why he has bottomless magic will be revealed! I think you will find it's a surprising twist! I would be delighted if you tried to figure out what his true identity is!

And then we have Johann who manages to save the day at the last minute and grows into even more of a reliable, nice guy! He is steadily opening up to his friends, and that has only helped to improve his barbed word choice! The plan is for him to continue being our trusty info-dumper (haha!) as he gradually

grows more powerful and ready to become the next Pope in charge of Sanctuary.

Then there's Dark Lord and Nako who took a break from this volume, but will have starring roles during the Dark Lord Castle Arc coming in Volume 4! Please look forward to seeing how Hero Elias and the Dark Lord clash! Sutcliff will also have a big role in the next volume now that he has joined the Hero Party!

Last but not least we have Mina and Louis! We saw a glimpse of Mina's past as an Adventurer and why she has always wanted to join the Hero Party. In my mind, Aki is the reason why Mina wants to trust people again, and it is because she has become such an important friend to Mina that she is willing to do anything to protect her. Aki also views Mina as her one and only girlfriend in this world, and the person she can tell anything. I'm pretty sure these two ladies will continue to lead the men of the Hero Party by the nose!

Meanwhile, Louis harbors secrets of his own—he's more than just a wandering Minstrel. I plan to go into more detail on his background in the upcoming volumes!

Now that I'm finished discussing how the characters grew in this third volume, I want to extend my thanks to Kiyu Kanae for drawing the beautiful cover and internal art again! To me, Kiyu's art breathes life into my characters, and she is an irreplaceable partner to the creation of this world! I hope to continue collaborating with her in the future!

I also want to thank Charis Messier for bringing the story to life in English! Thank you for always supporting my ideas! I'm really looking forward to what turns of phrase she uses in the translation this time around!

Finally, I want to thank all of you who have continued to support this series from Volume 1! You have my deepest gratitude for picking up a copy of Volume 3 as well!

Every time I see readers talking about how much they enjoy the story and are looking forward to the next arc, I'm so encouraged! Please continue to support me!

I would be delighted if you sent in fan letters or fanart for your favorite characters!

Thank you for reading this far. I hope we meet again in Volume 4.

Now, let's go on an adventurous journey to save the world!

03.20

From my home in Japan in early spring



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THE WEREWOLF COUNT AND THE TRICKSTER TAILOR

STORY BY: YURUKA MORISAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: TSUKITO
VOL. 1 | OUT NOW

"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

Rock's whole life is shaken when a werewolf shows up at her shop in the middle of the night...asking for more than just clothes!

ANOTHER WORLD'S ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS NOT MY PROBLEM!

STORY BY: HARU YAYARI
ILLUSTRATION BY: FUYUKI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

Just when I thought navigating high school was bad enough, I woke up to a rotting, post-apocalyptic world!



OF DRAGONS AND FAE: IS A FAIRY TALE ENDING POSSIBLE FOR THE PRINCESS'S HAIRSTYLIST?

STORY BY: TSUKASA MIKUNI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKIKANA
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

After being dumped by a dragon knight, Mayna sets out to prove that fairytale endings aren't only for princesses! See how this royal hairstylist wins over the dragon kingdom one head of hair at a time!

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THE ECCENTRIC MASTER AND THE FAKE LOVER!

STORY BY: ROKA SAYUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: ITARU
VOL. 1 & 2 OUT NOW

Fly with Nichika into a magic journey in another world with witches, shapeshifters, inventors, summon spirits, princess generals, homunculus, and a quirky master-apprentice duo in The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover!

**HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!**
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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